

SPIRITED FLESH:
AN INTUITIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE BODY
IN CONTEMPORARY FEMALE MYSTICS

by

Vipassana Christine Esbjörn

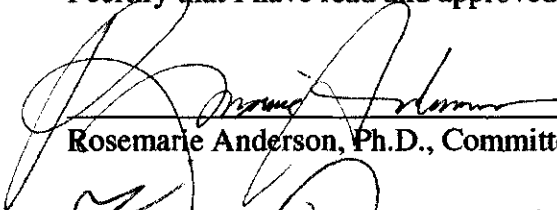
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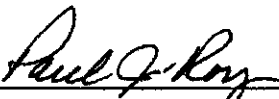
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Abstract

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Vipassana Christine Esbjörn

This dissertation explored the body in relationship to spirituality—flesh and spirit—in particular, as they are experienced in contemporary female mystics. This study used a hermeneutic research method called intuitive inquiry, a process of interpretation that includes as part of the method, the subjectivity of the researcher. The research included an intuitive and systematic analysis of various historical spiritual texts on the body, and then widened to include texts from interviews with 12 contemporary female mystics. These women represent a variety of mystical traditions and spiritual paths including Christianity, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, African Spirituality, Yoga, Indian Tantra, Authentic Movement, and Diamond Logos. Ages range from 40 to 76; one participant is Chinese-American, one is African-American, and the others are European-American. At least three participants are celibate. Themes that were explored through the semi-structured interviews include the body in relationship to self, sexuality, death, physical transformation, and spiritual liberation. Results included the interpretations of the researcher, presented in the format of discussion. The primary interpretation was that women who have devoted their lives to a path of spiritual inquiry tend to go through a process of disidentification and re-identification with the body that is dialectic in nature, taking place in cycles, deepening throughout one's lifetime. Secondary interpretations were that (a) childhood experiences, from visions to trauma, serve as a catalyst for spiritual sensitivity in the body; (b) the body serves as a barometer, where intuition

becomes physicalized; (c) transformation of the body occurs on a cellular level; (d) being embodied is a choiceful act; (e) sexuality is integral to embodiment; (f) bringing spirit into matter is purposeful; (g) spiritual maturation includes an energetic awakening of the body; (h) boundaries—between you and me, world and self—are experienced as permeable; (i) self reference, or awareness of ‘I,’ is fluid and flexible and is not fixed in the body; (j) the contemplation of death brings into focus the immediacy of life; (k) women are teachers of conscious embodiment; and (l) inquiring into the relationship between body and spirit deepens and enlivens one’s experience of living as a body. The researcher concluded that this process of inquiry holds the potential to change the participant, researcher, text, and method.

To my mother, Ritu Esbjörn

and my father, Robert Clarke

my first teachers
in what it means
to be a human being

and to Osho

my first teacher
of the spirit

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction

*For the ignorant person, this body is the source
of endless suffering, but to the wise person,
this body is the source of infinite delight.*

Vasishtha
as quoted in Feuerstein, 1998, p. 57

This study seeks to understand what it means to live as a body. Even to begin with the use of this language—suggesting that *we live as a body*—already communicates a host of assumptions. To say that I live as a body is considerably different from saying that *I live with a body*, or *in a body*, or *I have a body*. This is still different from, *I am being bodily* or *embodied*, or *I am flesh*, or *I am body*. What is this body that I live with, in, as, and through—and what does my body have to do with me? Furthermore, who is the *me* who is living with, in, as, and through this body? Am ‘I’ my body? And what about God? What does all of this have to do with spirit or God? If I am made in the image of God, does that include every aspect of my body, even my raw sexuality? When my body ceases to be animated by life force—when I die—what happens then to this body that is me, or not me? These are the considerations that formed the early seeds of this study. They arose from a lifetime of hungering to know what body is, especially for those mystic types, women mystics in particular, today and throughout time.

The aim of this study was to explore the vast territory we call the body. I wanted to know how spirit and flesh were historically experienced and understood by the individual and collective. I longed to know the conversations—philosophical, religious, mystical—that had centered around the body across cultures and throughout time, and to participate in the contemporary dialogue that is occurring now in relation to the body. Probably in part because I am a woman who values spirit, I especially wanted to

understand how women who have spent a significant portion of their lifetime devoted to spirit—in prayer, meditation, and various other spiritual endeavors—made sense of the body. What was the relationship between spirit and body, God and flesh, for such women? Was it a relationship of tension, or even opposition? I understand more fully now, how even this question—one that describes a relationship *between* spirit and flesh—quite possibly assumes a dualistic perspective, a split between spirit and body that is at least as old as Plato. The evolution out of my own version of the Cartesian mind-body split is documented throughout this work.

As I wove my way through the literature on the body—Continental philosophy to poststructuralism, Christian mysticism to Vajrayana Buddhism, feminist theology to conscious embodiment—I began to change. My views on the body were expanded, deconstructed, and constantly became more nuanced as a result of entering into dialogue with the mystics and scholars who have for centuries, with precision and passion, investigated our corporeality.

My vehicle for this investigation was a qualitative research method developed by Rosemarie Anderson (2000) called intuitive inquiry, a method that incorporates many of the principals found in hermeneutics. A brief introduction to the research method of intuitive inquiry is included in the present chapter. A detailed description of the method, as well as how the research was carried out is included in a later discussion located in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. This intuitive inquiry research included several cycles of textual interpretation as a means of understanding the body. Because I used a research method that asks the researcher to formally include his or her own values, assumptions, and evolution of thinking throughout the interpretive process—true to hermeneutic

research—my own considerations regarding the body, and the changes that they went through are well documented in this dissertation.

Given the nature of scholarly research, and considering my love of the written word, it is possible that some of the struggle, confusion, and *wrestling with* that I went through in this intuitive inquiry research process might be lost in this final presentation. I have attempted to capture the twists and turns and stagnant muddles I encountered throughout this dissertation. Yet still, writing about being bewildered and lost *after* you have found your way again is not the same as sitting in the confusion and stuckness, being bewildered week after week, and groping for clarity in the midst of turbulence and chaos. The nature of intuitive inquiry required me to at first tolerate and then eventually rest in the moments of unclarity, for they were often the generative spots from which new insights emerged. Rosemarie Anderson, the founder of intuitive inquiry, once said to me, “Without bewilderment nothing new or creative is likely to be found. . . . Feeling sure you know what you are doing is a problem. Bewilderment is to be cherished” (personal communication, May 18, 2003). The value of developing the capacity to cherish bewilderment certainly extends beyond scholarly research; for the practice of cherishing bewilderment, or relaxing and rejoicing in the unknown, is a profound spiritual discipline.

Intuitive inquiry is a method of research that invites the researcher to explore a chosen topic, one that very often has personal meaning for the person doing research, through entering into several cycles of interpretation or engagement with texts that are relevant to the topic. In this dissertation the texts that I used during the first cycle of interpretation were in the form of the written word. They consisted of texts drawn from a Buddhist meditation practice and a poem. During the second cycle of interpretation,

excerpts from a book and the music and lyrics from a song served as texts. After those texts were worked with over a period of time, during a third cycle of interpretation, original data was collected through interviews with 12 contemporary female mystics. Edited transcripts of these interviews served as texts during this third and final cycle of interpretation. These edited transcripts or “portraits” are presented in their entirety in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, providing for the reader an opportunity to engage the same material that I did throughout the course of the study.

The participants in this study are women spiritual leaders, teachers, and healers who are viewed by their communities as such. They are people who have devoted a significant portion of their life to their spiritual path. These women represent a variety of mystical traditions and paths including Christianity, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, African Spirituality, Yoga, Indian Tantra, Authentic Movement, and Diamond Logos. While the participants are relatively diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and spiritual tradition, a significant limitation in diversity is the fact that all of them live in California, in the United States of America.

After engaging the words of these women over an extended period of time, I then took the themes and ideas—the essence of what these texts communicated to me—and considered them in relationship to my earlier assumptions and interpretations regarding the topic, found in cycles 1 and 2. Out of this process, new and changed insights emerged that would become my distilled themes or lenses of interpretation. This was the final cycle of interpretation. A discussion describing this stage of the research and the ideas gleaned during this final cycle of interpretation is documented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Part of what drove me to embark on this study is a question that arose in response to the growing call for embodiment among contemporary spiritual and philosophical mystics and scholars. In Western culture the call for an embodied, fleshy, corporeal spirituality—one that is largely a response to the mind-body or spirit-body dichotomy set in motion by Christianity and Continental philosophy centuries prior—is growing louder.

The notion of transcendence, on the other hand, is often understood as the capacity to realize an eternal spirit that exists beyond our temporal form, one that is not subject to the laws of birth and death, space or time. Transcendence is a universal concept that is found across most mystical and religious traditions. I am using the term *transcendence* in accordance with Ken Wilber's (1999, 2000) definition. Namely, this points to the process of identifying with something bigger (eternal, timeless, spaceless) than body, emotions, mind, and ego. Primordial Spirit or Self, Atman, Brahman, the absolute, nondual awareness, Godhead, and Witness are sometimes used to describe the “something bigger” that we are invited to identify with beyond the relative world of body, emotions, mind, and ego.

The question then, that arose for me in response to the call for embodied spirituality was this: Is there not some form of freedom that comes with disidentifying from our relative identity as bodies? Do we not know the timeless and formless realm of consciousness more intimately when we have experienced ourselves as infinitely greater and more expansive than our corporeal reality? My hope was to conduct research that would further our understanding regarding the necessity of being consciously embodied, while exploring forms of disidentification from the body that may be either an impediment or support to spiritual liberation.

Spiritual practices that specifically focus on disidentifying from the body seemed particularly relevant to this study. An example of such a technique is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Chöd, whereby the practitioner systematically cuts through ego-clinging by working with one's attachment to the body. Visualizing the body as a corpse is understood as one way to loosen the grip of identification with our fleshy form. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Machig Labdrön, who lived in Tibet from 1055 to 1153 C.E., is said to have attained realization of emptiness, the true nature of mind. Out of her awakened state arose spontaneous songs that became part of Chöd practice. She sang:

The body? Drop it as if it were a corpse.
 Leave it as if it had no owner.
 Mind? Let it [be] as if it were the sky.
 Leave it alone as if it had no object. (Edou, 1996, p. 49)

The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa, when under attack by a fleet of demons, is said to have offered them his body as a gesture of renunciation and goodness. He said:

This human body, composed of skandhas,
 Is transient, mortal and delusory.
 Since in time I must discard it,
 He who would, may take it now.
 May the offering of my body serve as a ransom
 For all mankind and sentient beings. (Edou, 1996, p. 54)

In a similar vein as Milarepa's generous offering to the demons, Machig sends compassion to all beings when she says, "With the hook of compassion I catch those evil spirits. Offering them my warm flesh and warm blood as food, through the kindness and compassion of bodhichitta I transform the way they see everything and make them my disciples" (Edou, 1996, p. 41). Perhaps it is not surprising that a practice such as Chöd would come out of a culture like Tibet, one that historically works openly with complex concepts and spiritual practices related to death.

More than anything, what guided me into and through this study was a sense that freedom, in the largest sense of the word, has something to do with being fully embodied in one's flesh. At the same time, it calls us to have an ability and willingness to disidentify from our temporal form, or fleshly body. Throughout this study that spanned 3 years, I wrestled with a sense that perhaps, like all of the material world, that which we are not clinging to is only that which we are fully free to explore. In other words, maybe we can truly enjoy life through our bodies only when we are not terrified of being without them.

Finally, this dissertation research served as a vehicle for a personally profound spiritual inquiry into the nature of spirit and the body, as it is living in *this very spirited-flesh body, me*. Over the course of the last 3 years, this dissertation research has provided for me the container to do some of the most profound spiritual inquiry that I have undertaken in my life. Like any spiritual practice which produces insight and greater understanding in its students, I imagine that it will take time for the insights and understandings gained through this project to gradually become fully integrated within me. What I do know thus far is that those burning questions about matters of spirit and the flesh have found a home in these pages, for the method of intuitive inquiry proved to be a deep and wide enough vessel to hold these ancient questions about the nature of being human.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Word became flesh so that I might become God.

Angela of Foligno
as quoted in Hollywood, 2002, p. 187

Prior to the inception of this study, years of immersion in literature and experiential practices aimed at inquiring into the nature of self and the body have shaped me. Most important are the ideas and practices in Eastern mysticism, particularly Buddhist meditation—Vipassana, Zen, and Vajrayana practices; self-inquiry as described by Ramana Maharshi; and the kundalini phenomenon. In addition, 6 years as a massage therapist allowed me to study the body from a particular vantage point—one that was up-close, tactile, fleshy. These various influences directed me toward the present study, which in turn widened my scope of the ideas, practices, and literature pertaining to the body.

One way of understanding the literature relevant to this study is to consider it through the lens of several distinct, yet often overlapping and interrelated fields of study. I have organized this literature review roughly around four areas, though I realize that there exists a wide range of ways one could organize this vast amount of literature. Quite possibly, an argument could be made that each author, article, book, or poem that I have placed in one group, could just as easily be understood as belonging to at least one other area. For the purpose of this study, the literature will be considered from within, but not limited to the following four areas of study: philosophy of the flesh; religious and mystical traditions grappling with the flesh; the voices of women mystics and saints on the body; and conscious embodiment. As an essential component to any discussion on the body, the theme of sexuality will be addressed as it is threaded throughout the literature.

Philosophy of the Flesh

Since at least as early as Plato in the 5th Century B.C., Western philosophy has long grappled with the tenuous mind-body relationship, a dialogue that is deeply intertwined within the tendrils of Christian theology. It is far beyond the scope of this literature review to present a thorough and nuanced critique of the various movements involved in the mind-body discourse since Plato. I will, however, paint a few broad brush strokes to capture the larger movements related to the mind-body discourse since the rise of Modern philosophy. This dialogue is woven through a plethora of fields—from sociology to anthropology, history, biology, French social theory, structuralist philosophy, philosophical phenomenology, existentialist philosophy, philosophical psychoanalysis, and feminist theory (Coakley, 1997).

In the seventeenth century Descartes' legacy of the body as separate from and inferior to the mind was birthed, one that epitomized Western Cartesian positivism and shapes views of the body for the next 300 years. A few centuries later, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844/1908) presented a radical challenge to the ideas that Descartes had put forth. Nietzsche instead suggests that knowledge is borne from corporeal reality. He proposes the radical notion that knowledge springs forth from our fleshly existence. Nietzsche argues that the preference for heavenly or transcendent realms may simply be a kind of dissociation or flight from misery, and furthermore, it is the body that transports us to other realms. Nietzsche explains:

It was the sick and decaying who despised body and earth and invented the heavenly realm and the redemptive drops of blood: but they took even these sweet and gloomy poisons from body and earth. They wanted to escape their own misery, and the stars were too far for them. . . . Ungrateful, these people deemed themselves transported from their bodies and this earth. But to whom did they owe the convulsions and raptures of their transport? To their bodies and this earth. (pp. 144-145)

Nietzsche is often understood as one of the fathers of the postmodern movement. In many ways he sits on the fence between modern and postmodern thought, using himself as a bridge between the two eras. Nietzsche is important to our dialogue here in that he is one of the first of the Continental philosophers to explicitly talk about matters of the body (Welton, 1999).

Postmodernism understands the body to be a text, one that requires interpretation. For the postmodernist, there is no “body,” for it is understood to be, like all objects, a social construction that requires interpretation. The French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan is an important figure among the postmodernists and poststructuralists in that he explores deeply, notions pertaining to the body and its environment. Lacan suggests that infants do not experience themselves as separate from the world, that they have no concept of their bodies as separate and distinct from the world.

Other essential philosophers who helped shape our current understandings about the body are Edmund Husserl (1913/1962), Martin Heidegger (1962), and most notably, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962). Husserl is a mathematician turned philosopher who is most often associated with phenomenology. He is interested in patterns of thought and the universal nature of objects. Husserl says about the body: “The Body is, in the first place, *the medium of all perception*; it is the *organ of perception* and is *necessarily* involved in all perception” (as cited in Welton, 1999, p. 12). Husserl claims that the body is “the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and now out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses” (p. 12). In addition to the importance of the body as the central force of orientation, Husserl argues the body is primary in assisting us to construct our spatial world. Furthermore, it was Husserl who first constructed the presentation of *Leib*, the lived-body, and posed it as an alternative and in

opposition to *Körper*, the purely physical body. This distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* is foundational to Husserl's phenomenological exploration of the body (Welton, 1999).

Heidegger, also a thinker in phenomenology, was a student of Husserl. Arguing that it is not possible to separate the mind from the body, Heidegger's position is that the world, including our bodies, is a product of our mind and mental projections. It is this position of a mentally constructed world that associates Heidegger with the later school of postmodern thinkers, those who propose a view of the world and all its constituents as socially constructed. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) attempts to shift the phenomenological approach to the body that Husserl presented into an ontology which is concerned with *being* in the world. Heidegger shifts from Husserl's presentation of subjectivity to that of human existence, of *Dasein*. He transforms the issue of the body into an exploration of embodiment. It was Heidegger who suggested, "We do not 'have' a body; rather we 'are' bodily" (as cited in Welton, 1999, p. 4). An important contemporary figure who elaborates on the work of Heidegger is David Levin (1999) who explores the constituents that make up *Dasein*, most notably the "seasons" of embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) expands upon the later work of Husserl, while drawing on aspects of Heidegger's presentation of being-in-the-world, to form his notion of *flesh*. Merleau-Ponty was the first of the Continental thinkers to elaborate on this philosophy of the flesh, which is deeply intertwined with sensing and intentionality, the body and the earth. Merleau-Ponty highlights how it is through reason and cognition that we know the body. He argues that reason is not disembodied; it is an outgrowth of our embodied experience. An essential concept for Merleau-Ponty is that of embodiment. For him it is impossible to separate mind from body, therefore, consciousness is always married to blood and bones, the lived reality of tissue and flesh. Merleau-Ponty is probably most

known for his notion of “the lived body,” the perception that it is through the body that we *be* in the world. Expounding his theory of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty suggests,

Consciousness is being towards the thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its “world”, and to move one’s body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand. (as cited in Welton, 1999, pp. 154-55)

Reflecting on how exactly we are situated in time and space Merleau-Ponty explains,

“We must therefore avoid saying that our body is in space or in time. It inhabits space and time” (as cited Welton, 1999, p. 156). In addition to his understanding of the lived

body, especially relevant to this particular study is Merleau-Ponty’s concept of

“doubleness.” This refers to a notion he explores that articulates the idea of how an individual is simultaneously able to touch and be touched. He posits that it is through this experience of doubleness that a person lives as both subject and object. Merleau-Ponty (1968/2000) explains his notion of doubleness:

We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other. (p. 137)

By illustrating how we are literally both subject and object at once, Merleau-Ponty grounds objectivity in our own bodies—in embodiment.

Reflecting on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Gary Brent Madison (1981) elaborates on the notion of flesh as expressed by Merleau-Ponty. Madison explains that it is this notion of *flesh* that is central to Merleau-Ponty’s work, in that it points to the issue of the subjective and objective. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh is that which incorporates both

subject and object, the toucher and the touched; it is the sensing object and the sensible. Madison claims, “For if the distinction between subject and object is blurred in the body, which is a sensible, it is also blurred throughout all of the sensible, such that the sensible is no longer only things but also the subject which perceives them” (p. 171). Especially relevant to this study, Madison articulates how the flesh is understood in relation to matter for Merleau-Ponty:

Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty the flesh is not *matter* nor is it *spirit*. Neither is it nature which is immanent to the spirit nor the spirit present in nature. All of the categories of traditional metaphysics are powerless to describe it, because the flesh is in no wise a *substance*, whether material or spiritual. . . . It is more immanent to the subject than any noesis and more transcendent than any noema; it is in fact the common source of all noeses and all noemas, the source of the intentional relation itself which precisely for this reason eludes all eidetic intuition. (p. 176)

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the notion of flesh is best understood as an element, such as earth, fire, water, or air. Flesh is the root, the principal, the *general* through which the *particular* springs forth. Merleau-Ponty (1968) states that the flesh is “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (p. 147). Madison (1981) elaborates on this statement when he says about the flesh that, “It is our medium and our element just as water is the element of fish” (p. 177). He continues by saying that, like water is to fish, flesh is the invisible element that

unites us to things and which makes it be that the sentient body and the sensed thing are compatible within the same universe; the flesh is the latency and the depth and the possibility of all presence and, for this reason, is never itself present, never itself visible. (Madison, 1981, p. 177)

The flesh therefore, is for Merleau-Ponty, being itself. Madison (1981) describes this beautifully when he says that “we are entirely mixed in with Being; we are gathered up with things into a fabric of Being which is quite literally our own flesh” (p. 177).

Merleau-Ponty’s elaborations on flesh describe a truly nondual perspective on body and

spirit that privileges neither one over the other, but instead mixes being with flesh in a matrix that is both subject and object. Madison (1981) says,

Thus that body by which I am in the world is itself a part of the world, a bit of it's flesh . . . it is that sensible mass which is sensible for itself; it is an exemplary sensible, a carnal being with two dimensions which but concretizes the spread-out visibility of the visible; the body is a sensing sensible. (p. 174)

Merleau-Ponty shows for us how the element of flesh transcends pure categories of matter and spirit for it is both a product of the world of matter, and it is being itself which infuses all matter. As Madison suggests, our fleshy reality is completely mixed in with being.

Growing out of Merleau-Ponty's work are contemporary thinkers such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) who write extensively about "embodied flesh." Lakoff and Johnson expand upon latent ideas within Merleau-Ponty's work which speak to an emphasis on language. Challenging the traditional view of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that it is through our embodied experience that we form metaphors—up, down, high, low—and that how we interact with the world then arises out of these metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson claim: "Reason and conceptual structure are shaped by our bodies, brains, and modes of functioning in the world. Reason and concepts are therefore not transcendent, that is, not utterly independent of the body" (p. 128). From this perspective, one could say that language grows out of the body, given that metaphor is the substratum between body and reason. This is an inverted perspective from that of the postmodernists who argue that the body is a text which requires interpretation. For Lakoff and Johnson, as was the case for Merleau-Ponty, the body is foundational.

The Foul and Celebratory Body:
Religious and Mystical Traditions Grapple with the Flesh

Christianity, a religion that professes the incarnation and embodiment of the divine since its earliest days, reminds us that “we are indeed made in the image and likeness of God, a likeness most perfectly manifested in the humanity of Christ” (Milos, 1993, p. 194). At the same time, it is widely recognized that a spirit-flesh dualism has long permeated the Christian culture, particularly where sexuality, and often where women (who are likened to flesh, while men are associated with spirit) are concerned. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (1986) reminds us that “Augustine put this very aptly: for him emotionalism is flesh, rationality spirit; woman is the embodiment of the spirit, and the relationship between the two reflects the Christian world order” (p. 85). Augustine put it this way:

Where the flesh rules and the spirit serves, the house is in disorder. What is worse than a house where the woman has rule over the man? However, a house is right where the man commands and the woman obeys. So man is right where the spirit rules and the flesh serves. (as cited in Moltmann-Wendel, 1986, p. 85)

Christian perspectives that critique the spirit-flesh dualism embedded in Christianity and aim to recognize our fleshly embodiment arise from a number of often overlapping fields—body, sexual, feminist, ecofeminist, and incarnational theologies; Creation spirituality; and Christology. Rosemary Haughton (1969) speaks to the tension between spirit and flesh as it is played out in the institution and individual:

Christianity is, far more than any other, a physical religion, which is one reason why many spiritually minded people find it gross and fleshly, and try to refine it and ‘spiritualize’ it. But it is inescapably ‘fleshly,’ being founded in the human flesh of . . . Christ. (p. 38)

Haughton (1981) reminds us of the “sheer *literalness* of the way the phrase ‘the body of Christ’ is meant by St. Paul” (p. 174). Pauline theology is referenced throughout Christian literature on the body and embodiment, as themes of corporeality were

examined in various sections of Paul's letters: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body" 1 Cor. 15:44

(Authorized King James Version). In his study in Pauline theology, John A. T. Robinson (1952) articulates just how foundational the body is to Paul's theology:

One could say without exaggeration that the concept of the body forms the keystone of Paul's theology. In its closely interconnected meanings, the word *σῶμα* (*soma*) knits together all his great themes. It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by His body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined. Here, with the exception of God, are represented all the main tenets of the Christian Faith—the doctrines of Man, Sin, the Incarnation and Atonement, the Church, the Sacraments, Sanctification, and Eschatology. To trace the subtle links and interaction between the different senses of this word *σῶμα* is to grasp the thread that leads through the maze of Pauline theology. (p. 9)

The body of Christ is the Church; the body of Christ is the Eucharist; the body of Christ is every woman and man; the body of Christ is creation—literally, "he is the beginning and the end of all" (Haughton, 1981, p. 174).

A growing number of Christian theologians address the historically silent tension between sexuality and the Church. Joy Milos (1993), elaborating on Haughton's writings on spirituality and sexuality, supports the call to end the spirit-flesh dichotomy:

This spirit/flesh dualism, a pretense at being 'spiritually minded,' ultimately has a negative impact on both sexual and spiritual development. As Haughton presents it, the unfolding of human sexuality is also the unfolding of the human spirit, at least potentially. A stunting of growth happens when sexuality is kept separate from the rest of our life. (Milos, 1993, p. 195)

James Nelson's (1978) classic work on sexuality and theology, as well as his more recent (Nelson, 1995) contribution to the field of body theology, also argues that the time has come for the Christian church to recognize the progressive needs of its members, that they no longer want to leave their sexuality outside of the church. He states that

“(surprisingly enough) many Christians are, indeed, becoming conscious that the church really is a community of embodied, sexual persons” (1995, p. 38). Sexual theology challenges us to a dialectic—a living, breathing relationship between sexuality and theology:

It insists on a genuine conversation. It presses us to move not only from theology to sexuality but, at the same time, to move from our sexuality to theology. It invites us to listen to the body’s own speech, to think theologically with and through our bodies. It is convinced that the sexuality that has such power in our lives—the source of such anxiety, such joy, such yearning, such shame, such woundedness, such curiosity, such fulfillment—must be very close to the center of things. It involves embracing our embodiment not as a curse or affliction, nor as incidental to our search for meaning, but as opportunity to learn the poetry of mortal dwelling and, understanding more of that poetry, to live differently. (Nelson, 1995, p. 46)

What sort of transformation and development would be possible to us as humans, if we were to embrace our embodiment and live in the enlivening dialectic between sexuality and theology? Many contemporary theologians suggest that this is where true spiritual development and maturation occurs.

Sylvia Chavez-Garcia and Daniel Helminiak (1985) argue that not only is sexuality an integral aspect of a fully developed spiritual person, but that sexual development also facilitates spiritual growth, that they are inseparable. These authors assert that “a fully developed spirituality implies a fully developed sexuality, and vice versa” (Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985, p. 151). They draw comparisons between spiritual and religious experiences and those of sexual love by illuminating the similarities in language between the mystic’s rapturous ecstasy and the layperson’s sensual expression. Other authors (MacKnee, 1996, 1997) have argued the same point, using as examples such mystics as Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Teresa of Avila. There are those theorists who emphasize our biological base for experience (Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001) who also draw a correlation between the

language of spiritual bliss and erotic bliss. Chavez-Garcia and Helminiak propose being a sexually embodied self is the fundamental ground from which we experience the world:

I am not a self who happens to have a body. I am an embodied self, and my body is my self-present-to-the-world. My self is a “body-self.” Sexuality pervades the individual.

This psychological [*sic*] dimension of sexuality is expressed in the capacity to be deeply aroused by what we experience. It represents the availability of our whole being to respond to reality as felt, understood, known, or desired. Human wholeness entails a willingness to respond with as much of our totality as we are able. (1985, p. 156)

When we allow ourselves to be aroused by life, not only are we inhabiting our fleshly existence, but we are also opening ourselves to the spiritual transformation and communion that often accompanies such deep sensual arousal. But is the Church really ready to rejoice in the fully embodied, blood-and-bones truth of our humanness? E. E.

Whitehead and J. D. Whitehead (1989) put it this way:

Christians believe that sex is good because our bodies are good and holy. ‘Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit’, St Paul wrote to his friends at Corinth. God inhabits our bodies; the Creator delights to be present in this fleshly dwelling. But this conviction, at the heart of Christianity, remains incredible even to many Christians. The doctrine of the trinity, or the resurrection or the last judgment—these can be accepted on faith. But that God delights to dwell in this body—with its erections or menstruations or aching loneliness? Impossible! (p. 23)

Our humanness can sometimes be exactly what opens us to the divine. Even orgasm can be the doorway to mystical experience.

It is common across traditions to link the ecstasy of orgasm with spiritual experience (e.g., Feuerstein, 1992, 1998; Wade, 2000). Chuck M. MacKnee (1996, 1997) proposes that spiritual growth is available through the orgasm, since it momentarily shatters our world of concepts and brings us back to the embodied present. Similar to the kundalini energy found in the Hindu tradition (Feuerstein, 1998), sexuality can be understood as stemming from the same life source as spiritual phenomena—“the basic

life-force that we have chosen to call spirit” (May, 1982, p. 190). The relationship between mystical states and orgasm is a dialectic one, each having the capacity to induce the other. While orgasm can be a direct pathway to mystical experience, MacKnee (1997) suggests that intense spiritual experience can result in arousal or even orgasm, illustrating the dialectic between spirituality and sexuality.

We are invited by these contemporary scholars to revision Christianity, to seize the opportunity to work out our spirituality and sexuality in the flesh. Arthur Freeman (1988) describes the importance of recognizing our enfleshment particularly while “the church is struggling with its inherited antiflesh dualism” (p. 169). He is emphatic in his argument that being enfleshed is no mistake, not something to suppress or deny. Instead, the interrelationship between spirit and flesh is exactly what God intended. While Freeman stresses the importance of embracing our physical form, he also addresses the paradox of simultaneously embodying and transcending our flesh. He asks, how can we be fully embodied yet not restricted to our self as a body? Freeman suggests:

If we take seriously our enfleshment, then our spirituality in this life is to be worked out in the body and in the world. However, if we take seriously our soul, then we need to approach spirituality in such a way as to recognize that life is also preparation for what transcends it. Thus we are in need of a spirituality which takes flesh and world seriously, while transcending them. (p. 174)

Freeman shows a willingness and capacity to sit in the tension between embodiment and transcendence, flesh and spirit, not privileging or denying the importance of either aspect of our divine humanity.

Historically, traditional theology has privileged transcendence over immanence, spirit over flesh. While new theologies call for a celebration of the flesh, Alan Watts (1973) articulates the dim reality that is often found in the Church: “Somehow the psalmist’s aspiration for the rejoicing of his flesh in the living God doesn’t quite come off

in churchly circles. The Word becomes flesh, but only as far down as the neck” (p. 168). Watts sought to articulate an incarnational theology, one that would revive the mystical spirit in Christianity, and deny neither the world nor flesh, but to transform both. Creation-Centered Spirituality or a Theology of Spirit as envisioned by Mathew Fox (1983, 1999) also describes a new theology, one that is in the spirit of Watts’ vision. Fox’s model of theology includes “Eros, play, pleasure, and the God of delight” (1983, p. 11). It challenges the dualistic, patriarchal, fall-redemption model of spirituality, and instead teaches social transformation and love for the earth.

In his book titled *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh* (1999), Fox deconstructs—or one could say *fleshes out*—the history of flesh. Fox traces the evolution of flesh, which he considers to be the stuff of the universe: “If the universe is expanding, so too is flesh, for the universe is fleshy. Flesh is matter, and matter is flesh” (p. 19-20). Fox describes our fleshy universe as consisting of three layers: cosmic flesh, eco-flesh, and human flesh. He asks us to consider, rather than a fear of flesh, an awe of flesh: “Awe is what Thomas Aquinas called ‘chaste fear’—a fear that leads to reverence and gratitude, rather than a servile fear that renders us afraid and masochistic in the presence of bullies. A pleasure is built into what is awesome” (p. 40). Fox tells a new creation story, one that illustrates how we are all made of the same fleshy substance, the flesh of matter, and it is this very flesh that connects all beings in the universe.

Feminist theory and theology, each of which have numerous branches, and the related field of goddess-based spirituality, have a great deal to say about flesh, God, women, and sexuality (e.g., Moltmann-Wendel, 1994; Petroff, 1994; Ruether, 1993; Tomm, 1995). The denigration of women in the church, the denial of the body and therefore sexuality, and the destruction of the earth are common themes among feminist

theologians, as well as more hopeful themes of an embodied spirituality. Elisabeth

Moltmann-Wendel (1994) argues:

A church ruled by men living in celibacy, constructed according to a patriarchal pattern, in which that which is holy (the eucharist) and sexuality mutually exclude each other, will always have a split attitude toward the body. Only if it allows women into the priesthood, if it gives up its old reservations about the latent uncleanness of women, if it is able to bring back the body of Christ and the body of living persons with all their bodily processes into a proper relationship—only in this case could we gain confidence in the future of this church. But for this to happen, an old world would have to collapse. (p. 74)

As feminist theory across theology, philosophy, psychology, history, and postmodern thought surges, one wonders what sort of critical mass would be required for an “old world” to topple.

Winnie Tomm (1995) suggests one entry point, as she argues that a woman’s body and sexuality is a place of personal agency. She outlines an interpretation of eroticism as “an expression of spirituality energy in the body” (p. 67). Tomm suggests that an essential spiritual force women have available to them is an erotic one:

As we break free of the predominant view of women as sexual beings who serve the interests of an evolutionary intentionality characterized by male dominance and female subordination, women are awakening to themselves as agents of erotic energy which propels them into work where their sexuality, rationality, and spirituality are integrated. It is a triumphant energy which empowers a positive consciousness to resist oppression. Goddess consciousness is experienced variously. (p. 110)

This erotic force, sometimes called shakti, kundalini, or the energy of Kali from the Hindu tradition (Evola, 1992; Kinsley, 1986; Mookerjee, 1988) is discussed extensively by authors in the related field of Goddess spirituality (Noble, 1991). Tomm advocates, particularly for women, an erotic, fleshy, fully embodied spirituality. Like Tomm, Dorothy Donnelly (1982) is another voice among many feminists who are attempting to define an alternative to what history has known, to articulate a liberated and body-positive theology:

We as sexual beings must think through, theologize and philosophize about the meaning of our sexuality and employ it as the ambiance of any spirituality we may wish to live. We must develop an integrated humanity by recovering sexuality as a value, a gift and a basis for healthier spirituality. (p. 125)

Donnelly (1982) describes her vision of the 'feminist mystic' as one who loves her own body and knows God through her body; she is sexual as one who participates in creation through her body. Donnelly suggests that "God, then, loves us sexually because God loves us as human. Embodiedness becomes the magic ring, the sacred space for the act of worship that union with God epitomizes" (p. 134). Participating in creation through the body is one form of worship celebrated by lovers of the flesh. Tending to the earth's body, or envisioning the world as God's body is yet another form of worship that has been given increasing attention by ecologically-minded feminist theologians.

One such ecofeminist theologian is Sally McFague (1987, 1993) who—not altogether dissimilar to Fox's notion of earth flesh or universe flesh—challenges us to envision the world as God's body. McFague warns Christians that this metaphor could indeed be challenging in that it implies that God's body—the world—includes more than just Christians, and more than just human beings. McFague's metaphor is even more challenging to the Christian paradigm in that it risks reducing God to the world. This is not her intention though, for she aims to make palpable and personal the truth that "the world does not exist outside or apart from God" (McFague, 1987, p. 72). In this metaphor, God is made vulnerable, much as our human flesh and the earth's body is vulnerable:

If we follow out the implications of the metaphor, we see that God becomes dependent through being bodily, in a way that a totally invisible, distant God would never be. Just as we care about our bodies, are made vulnerable by them, and must attend to their well-being, God will be liable to bodily contingencies. The world as God's body may be poorly cared for, ravaged, and as we are becoming well aware, essentially destroyed, in spite of God's own loving

attention to it, because of one creature, ourselves, who can choose or not choose to join with God in conscious care of the world. (McFague, 1987, p. 72)

Elaborating on McFague's model of the world as God's body, John P. McCarthy (1993) stresses the importance of joining God and the world in one embrace by suggesting that "it offers a corrective to a tradition in which God and world designate separate realms ordered hierarchically" (p. 147).

Though not a feminist, but certainly a lover of the natural world, the mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1968) deserves mention in any discussion on God and the physical world. A Jesuit priest, geologist, and paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin had a deep love of God, and a passion for science and the natural and human world. In the last volume of his collected works, Teilhard de Chardin (1950/1978) wrote an autobiographical essay called *The Heart of Matter*. From an early age, Teilhard de Chardin held a particular reverence toward matter. He recalls: "I was certainly not more than six or seven years old when I began to feel myself drawn by Matter—or, more correctly, by something which 'shone' at the heart of Matter" (p. 17). In his autobiography, Teilhard de Chardin reflects on his studies in geology, and the notion that to the outside observer, it would appear that he was simply advancing his career in science. Though in fact, this was not the entire truth:

In reality, however, during the whole of my life there was but one thing which would irresistibly bring me back (even at the expense of paleontology) to the study of the great eruptive masses and continental shelves: that was an insatiable desire to maintain contact (*a contact of communion*) with a sort of universal root or matrix of beings.

The truth is that even at the peak of my spiritual trajectory I was never to feel at home unless immersed in an Ocean of Matter. (p. 20)

Teilhard de Chardin closes his autobiographical essay with a rapturous poem called *Hymn to Matter*, which captures beautifully his communion with the natural world:

‘Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock: you who yield only to violence, you who force us to work if we would eat.

‘Blessed be you, perilous matter, violent sea, untameable passion: you who unless we fetter you will devour us.

‘Blessed be you, mighty-matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, for us to go even further and further in our pursuit of truth.

‘Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations: you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards or measurement reveal to us the dimensions of God.

‘Blessed be you, impenetrable matter: you who, interposed between our minds and the world of essences, cause us to languish with the desire to pierce through the seamless veil of phenomena.

‘Blessed be you, mortal matter: you who one day will undergo the process of dissolution within us and will thereby take us forcibly into the very heart of that which exists. (p. 75)

It seems that Teilhard de Chardin thrusts himself so completely into the phenomenal world, the world of matter, that he reaches the absolute, boundless realm of spirit.

There are those mystics, both Western and Eastern, who might appear to privilege transcendence of the flesh, given their capacity to disidentify from the body as self. One of India’s most revered spiritual teachers, for example, is Ramana Maharshi, who lived from 1879 to 1950. He was said to have, upon attaining liberation at the holy mountain of Arunachala, abandoned his physical form for a period of 2 or 3 years:

On his arrival he threw away all his money and possessions and abandoned himself to a newly-discovered awareness that his real nature was formless, immanent consciousness. His absorption in this awareness was so intense that he was completely oblivious of his body and the world: insects chewed away portions of his legs, his body wasted away because he was rarely conscious enough to eat and his hair grew to unmanageable lengths. (Godman, 1985, p. 1)

In studying the lives of great spiritual teachers and saints (e.g., Teilhard de Chardin, 1968; Tweedie, 1979; Underhill, 1956), one wonders how common it is historically, for deeply spiritual individuals to live fully in the body, while at the same time recognizing the importance and freedom that comes with disidentification from this temporal reality, the flesh. A significant event in the life of Ramana Maharshi, one that clearly shaped his

expression of enlightenment, is relevant and worthy of mention. At the age of 16, Maharshi went through an experience that felt to him to be the death of his physical form; and all the while he remained in full conscious awareness. This was the moment he is said to have attained full enlightenment. Maharshi taught a pure form of Advaita Vedanta, a nondual approach to realization. In speaking on reincarnation, Maharshi explains to his disciples that the illusory process of taking birth occurs due to the mind's tendency to wrongly identify with the body. He said that this happens due to "the egotistical ignorance of identifying a body as 'I'" (Godman, 1985, p. 193-94). Maharshi repeatedly and patiently pointed out to his devotees, over many years and in a variety of ways, that when the ignorant illusion of mind is transcended, identification with the body no longer exists. It is important to recognize Ramana Maharshi's emphasis on the illusory identification with our physical form as occurring within the context of Hindu thought in India during the early 1900s. If he were still alive today, it is curious to imagine how Maharshi's luminous nondual teachings might interface with the call for embodiment prevalent among many of today's contemporary spiritual traditions.

Examining the Buddhist Pali texts, the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, Kathryn Blackstone (1998) illustrates how deeply imbedded in ancient Buddhist scripture is the belief in transcending or denying the flesh. She explains: "the body poses a powerful obstacle for those seeking the Buddhist goal of liberation from all ties, from a delusory perception of permanence and stability, and above all, from a false conception of self as real and abiding in any tangible sense" (pp. 59-60). Throughout these texts the "foul" body is described as a heap of blood, flesh, bones, and pus. It is said to be impure, stinking of urine, and food for worms and vultures. This starkly contrasts with writings that celebrate our human enfleshment, like those found in Christian body theology

(Nelson, 1995), women's spirituality, and Buddhist and Hindu schools of Tantra (e.g., Feuerstein, 1998; Shaw, 1994).

Miranda Shaw's (1994) extensive research on women in Tantric Buddhism illustrates an example of a full-bodied celebration of God through blood, bones, and flesh. In the book that grew out of her dissertation, hermeneutical methods were used to help reconstruct history through a gynocentric lens. The author spent 2 and 1/2 years in residence in Nepal and India, and did virtually all of her own translating from original texts. Texts written by about 40 tantric women were discovered through archival research and form the essential underpinning of Shaw's study. Shaw especially articulates the necessity of bridging the split between soul and body, and argues that Tantric Buddhism addresses these issues successfully:

Exponents of the tradition also write in depth and with precision about embodiment, which is understood to be not a "soul" in a "body" but rather a multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity, and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive. This nonessentialist self is seen not as a bounded or static entity but as the site of a host of energies, inner winds and flames, dissolutions, meltings, and flowings that can bring about dramatic transformations in embodied experience and provide a bridge between humanity and divinity. (p. 11)

Shaw's research provides a strong argument for deconstructing the myth that women in ancient Tibet were oppressed by the male-dominated environment in religion and spirituality. Instead, she suggests that women in ancient Tantric Buddhism were highly revered, embodied and erotic teachers: "There is extensive evidence that women participated fully in the emerging Tantric movement. Tantric biographies portray bold, outspoken, independent women. Tantric texts prescribe how women should be respected, served, and ritually worshipped" (Shaw, 1994, p. 4). Shaw is also suggesting that women need role models who fully embody the erotic fierce energy that the Tibetan dakinis are famous for. Shaw opens her book with a mesmerizing description of such yoginis:

The dakinis leap and fly, unfettered by clothing, encircled by billowing hair, their bodies curved in sinuous dance poses. Their eyes blaze with passion, ecstasy, and ferocious intensity. One can almost hear the soft clacking of their intricate bone jewelry and feel the wind stirred by their rainbow-colored scarves as they soar through the Tantric Buddhist landscape. These unrestrained damsels appear to revel in freedom of every kind. (p. 1)

Shaw makes a strong argument based on thorough research. Yet her work has been criticized by some scholars such as Judith Simmer-Brown (2001) for what Simmer-Brown says is a sort of rewriting of history—in a scholarly fashion—in order to support Shaw's position.

It is far beyond the scope of this dissertation to address all the variety of mystical traditions and their respective presentations on the body. This literature review is instead aiming to present a few important highlights to the reader, examples from various traditions that capture some of the common themes held by religion and mysticism.

Women Mystics and Saints Reflect on the Body

A number of texts exist that are written primarily by female scholars who document the voices of female mystics—contemporary and ancient—articulating their experience of the Divine, in relation to the body, religious text, the earth, and sexuality (e.g., Bancroft, 1989; Boucher, 1993; Dresser, 1996; Friedman & Moon, 1997; Willis, 1995). Some of these authors include live interviews, while many of them study the lives of female mystics primarily through text.

A contemporary work in the field of women's spirituality is a book called *The Feminine Face of God*, by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins (1991). In this text, the authors explore facets of the spiritual path found in over 100 women across North America. Through in-depth interviews these authors sought to elucidate a spiritual developmental model that might describe a common path that these women walked. What they found was widely varying stories that could only be encompassed by using the

metaphor of a richly varied garden. This exhaustive study provides thick descriptions of women's spiritual journeys that draw on a number of sacred traditions. Woven through this study is a number of accounts by women who suggest that the body is central to their spiritual awakening process. Speaking on the importance of the body as a "tuning fork for the divine," one woman says:

"Then in my forties I began to work with Tibetan spiritual techniques. As I opened to spiritual energies, through a number of different kinds of practices and body therapies, I realized that the body is like an antenna for God. I could tune my body as a huge cosmology of energies, with lattices of light stretching into other lattices of light. Gradually I learned that there isn't anything about our bodies that is not this antenna, this tuning fork for the divine." (p. 192)

Reflecting on another woman's relationship to her body as a gateway to the divine,

Anderson and Hopkins write:

In her middle thirties this same woman had another gate experience during the birth of her first child. But "unlike the first, this communion took place in my body, not my mind," she explained. "It permeated and diffused throughout my whole body." However, since she had no context in which to hold this experience of sacred embodiment, she did not speak about it for more than a decade. By then she had grown to understand that the connectedness she felt through her body was simply another entryway into her sacred garden, and one that was every bit as valid and important as the transcendent moment of revelation on the mountaintop. (p. 74)

While Anderson and Hopkins do address relationship as it arises for the female participants, as well as their sense of being fully embodied, their study does not thoroughly explore sexuality. Anderson herself described this fact as a limitation to the overall study. She said that in retrospect, she would have included this aspect of the spiritual journey more explicitly (personal communication, August 13, 1999).

There are a plethora of popular books currently on the market which chronicle the lives of women mystics, both past and present. This seems to be an exploding area of literature that speaks to the hunger women have to read the stories of women mystics and saints, ancient and contemporary. An important work in this category, which is now

considered to be a popular classic in that it is one of the first of its kind, is *Women of Wisdom*, by Tsultrim Allione (2000). In this text Allione explores the lives of six Tibetan female mystics. She presents these stories as tales of courage and inspiration that are intended to speak to the modern woman seeking spiritual meaning and inspiration. In her introduction, Allione points to the confusion that women in Tibet—and I think many Buddhist women these days—face in holding the tension between a woman's role in the sacred teachings juxtaposed with her role in Tibetan (or even Buddhist) culture. She writes,

Although many women in Tibet found ways to practice spirituality, they did so in a culture that gave them mixed messages. On the one hand they were subject to religious and cultural negation as women as equal vehicles for spirituality; on the other hand they were supported by the notion of women being the essence of wisdom and the dakini principal. They had to prove themselves in ways that men and monks did not. (p. 95)

This is a common theme that runs through many contemporary writings on women and Buddhism (e.g., Campbell, 1996; Friedman, 2000; Galland, 1998; Gross, 1993; Klein, 1995). As a person who practices Buddhist meditation, I also know this to be a theme that is alive with passion, controversy, and change in the contemporary North American Buddhist culture. In her book, documenting the life of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist nun, Tenzin Palmo, Vicki Mackenzie (1998) provides an excellent account of one woman's journey through Buddhism. This book provides an up-close and personal look into contemporary Buddhism through the life of Tenzin Palmo, an extraordinary nun who spent 12 years living in a cave while on retreat in the Himalayas.

A presentation similar to that of Allione's, though from a different tradition, is Carol Lee Flinders' (1993) study which documents the lives of seven medieval Christian women mystics. Once again, this text appears to be intended for a primarily female audience with its distinctly female tone and presentation. In her introduction, Flinders

writes, “In recent years, even in this most stubbornly patriarchal society, it has come to be recognized that God is not universally regarded as masculine, that here and there throughout the world and back through time, God is and has been worshiped as the Divine Mother” (p. 4). While we are invited by Flinders to consider God in the feminine form, the sexuality that the female is often associated with in Christian thought does not have a place in the foreground of her study. Flinders reflects on the sexual lives of her subjects—from St. Catherine of Genoa to St. Teresa of Avila—and the complexity of the culture with which they were embedded, when she says,

All seven of my subjects were celibate, even the “married saint” Catherine of Genoa, thanks to her husband’s conversion. Are we to think, then, that sex and spirituality are mutually exclusive? For contemporary women, this isn’t obvious. We are not as likely as our medieval counterparts to die in childbirth, after all, or to die exhausted after too *many* births. We might think it is possible to raise children and still maintain a genuine spiritual practice of one kind or another; we might even think that raising children can be central to our practice. We suspect that the relationship between spirituality and sexuality is both subtle and profound. (p. 224)

Both Allione and Flinders raise important points regarding the context through which we understand the lives of these historical saints and mystics. It is striking, when considering both cases, just how much we are changing in these postmodern times in terms of what women are allowed to do spiritually; and the freedom that we now have to be spiritual practitioners *and* mothers. Yet in the next breath, it is also striking to acknowledge just how much farther we have to go before women are afforded the same status as men when it comes to matters of the spirit.

Another such text that explores spiritual life and the feminine is the book by Regina Sara Ryan (1998), *Woman Awake*. Ryan weaves her own life story as a former Catholic nun into the text as she explores the lives of 24 exemplary “women of spirit.” In a discussion on body and sex as they relate to the spiritual path, Ryan suggests that while

we like to think of sexuality as a doorway to the Divine, our humanness sometimes obstructs this possibility. Ryan says,

The difficulty is that, despite these great claims of liberation through sex, more of us still carry in our bodies the inheritance—physical, psychological, emotional, psychic, and spiritual—of at least four generations of women and men whose views on sex were clouded by fear, disconnected from an actual “body” of wisdom, and strongly influenced by the culture’s perverse and rigid views. (p. 332)

Ryan then uses her own life history as a Catholic nun to point to the challenge of transformation occurring on a cellular level when she says, “We still need tremendous diligence to make inroads deep into our cells, where these memories and instructions are stored” (p. 332). She reflects on the ways in which religious traditions are sometimes ill prepared for such considerations regarding sexuality and the body. Ryan continues:

Even if we are successful in liberating our *minds* from the insanity of a sex-negative relationship to life, the body doesn’t easily give up its rigidity—rigidity is falsely assumed to support its survival. I know this particular dilemma of the spiritual path firsthand. My own years, from age eighteen to twenty-six, spent as a nun in a Catholic convent, were ripe and rich, full of great experiences in training and discipline, practice and prayer. Yet, in all that time, no education was ever offered about the interplay of my female sexuality within the lifestyle I had chosen. (p. 332)

It seems that Ryan, along with the other authors in this section of the literature, are attempting to elucidate a feminine principal—aspects of the feminine that accompany a spiritual unfolding in the lives of women of spirit. I see my own work in this dissertation, largely, as an extension of this body of literature.

Conscious Embodiment

A final area of the literature that will be mentioned in this review pertains to the vast area which we could loosely call conscious embodiment. This includes thinkers, theorists, and most notably practitioners in body-based practices who are attempting to articulate, from an embodied perspective, a conscious relationship to the body. This

enormous area of literature sweeps across and touches upon body-based therapies and practices such as Gendlin's (1962/1997) *Focusing*, Ida Rolf's (1977) discovery of *Rolfing*, Mary Whitehouse (1995, 1999) and Janet Adler's (1999, 2002) articulation of *Authentic Movement*, and Emilie Conrad Da'Oud's (1995) *Continuum* practice—to name only a very few. There are also theorists such as Don Johnson (1995) who are devoted with passion to marrying flesh and language as a way of pointing out what is possible in a conscious relationship to the body. Rosemarie Anderson's (2001) work on embodied writing is particularly relevant to this aspect of the discussion—the relationship of language to the body. This area also includes spiritual teachers and scholars woven through a variety of traditions who are especially interested in languaging an awareness of the body, as they are illustrating a nondual relationship of spirit and the flesh.

A closer look at Janet Adler's work reveals an exploration and articulation of her work in the field of Authentic Movement over the past several decades. Explaining the importance of the witnessing self, in the role of “the mover” within the discipline of Authentic Movement, Adler (2002) explains:

Spiritual growth, like physical and emotional growth, is developmental. At this time in the mover's practice, the primary intention is to ground and strengthen her inner witness. In doing so we are not only developing an appropriate and safe enough vessel that can hold conscious embodiment of unresolved aspects of personal history, but one can hold transpersonal experiences as well. The presence of a healthy enough inner witness is a prerequisite for a safe reception of the full blessings of energetic phenomena. Experience of the mysteries can only be in service of the development of consciousness when they are embodied, when the mover's inner witness is aware of her physical movement and any accompanying inner phenomena. (p. 29)

It seems that a very common principal found within a wide range of schools exploring various forms of conscious embodiment is that of the witness or presence. It is often said that to merge with energetic phenomena or bodily sensations is to lose the witness or observing capacity. This collapse into our subjectivity—or the experience of identifying

with that which is arising, be it thoughts, feelings, or sensations—is also a principal that spans far and wide across spiritual disciplines and meditation practices. For example, in Buddhist Vipassana meditation, the practitioner is encouraged to develop the capacity for *being with* that which is arising, without becoming identified (or overly-identified) with that which is arising. As Adler suggests, this development of the inner witness is essential to spiritual growth and development.

It is becoming more and more common to find contemporary spiritual persons from a variety of traditions speaking and writing on the importance of including the body in the process of awakening. As the German born scholar turned spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (1999) suggests, “The body can become a point of access into the realm of being” (p. 89). He claims that people simply do not become enlightened through denying, fighting, or leaving the body. Tolle describes the history of dissociation from the body commonly found in religious traditions:

When religions arose, this dissociation became even more pronounced as the “you are not your body” belief. Countless people in East and West throughout the ages have tried to find God, salvation, or enlightenment through denial of the body. This took the form of denial of sense pleasures and of sexuality in particular, fasting, and other ascetic practices. They even inflicted pain on the body in an attempt to weaken or punish it because they regarded it as sinful. In Christianity, this used to be called mortification of the flesh. (p. 95)

Rather than by dissociating from the body, Tolle claims that it is *through* the body that transformation occurs. A student of the contemporary crazy wisdom teacher in the Baul tradition Lee Lozwick, Rick Lewis (2000) also suggests that in the human body we have the potential to awaken and realize the entire universe. Lewis says, “Conscious perception of the human body all at once brings about a particular kind of miracle in which the body then exists as a microcosm of the entire universe and everything can be known within it” (p. 90). Lewis speaks to the commingling of spirit and body, the

absolute and relative that is at the very core of this study. He says beautifully, “A human being is the tangent point where time and no-time cross paths. A human being lives with the necessity of becoming skilled at forever balancing on this tightrope of this paradox” (p. 94). As Tolle does, Lewis (2000) warns against the temptation of dissociating from our bodies, and proposes instead that we consider super-association:

“Leaving one’s body” can happen in two ways: either through the denial of the body or through the full awareness of it. The first is dissociation, the second is super-association, where one becomes so associated with one’s body that one discovers the actual size, presence, and depth of that body to be infinitely more expansive than was ever imagined. Super-association makes us ecstatic in life, which is then our heaven. Dissociation only makes us crazy as hell. (p. 108)

It is common in the current literature on the body to hear such warnings against dissociation as those seen above. Perhaps this is indicative of a growing collective movement toward conscious embodiment, or embodied spiritual awakening (Bynum, 1995; Goldenberg, 1990; Klein, 1997; Martin, 1997).

The contemporary spiritual teacher Adyashanti (2000), who comes out of the Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta traditions, explains how it takes time and is a gradual process to fully awaken throughout one’s body. Adyashanti suggests:

After sudden Awakening to the Self, there begins a process of gradual embodiment of the transcendent into the human personality. By gradual I mean the deepening of realization after the experience of enlightenment. The more the transcendent Self becomes embodied within our humanness, the more vast our view becomes, and the more we express and manifest transcendent realization in the way we live life. (p. 63)

It appears that we are only at the beginning of an explosion of literature that explicitly includes the body—inhabiting the body, super-association with the body, enlightening the body, awakening in, as, and through the body—as central to the spiritual awakening process.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The research for this dissertation was implemented using a qualitative research method called intuitive inquiry, which has been briefly introduced in previous chapters. This chapter examines intuitive inquiry with more precision, and illustrates how the method was used to design and carry out the research for this dissertation. This chapter illustrates the story of my particular engagement with intuitive inquiry. It presents my detailed step-by-step research process: a discussion on how I chose my topic; what some of my understandings were in the early stages of this study; who my participants were and how I found them; what the data-gathering process looked like; and how I worked with the various texts collected throughout this study. I conclude with a brief section outlining the process through which I drafted the discussion chapter.

Intuitive Inquiry

Intuitive inquiry was developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998) initially as a qualitative research method especially intended for the study of transformative experiences. Since the time she first envisioned and articulated intuitive inquiry, Anderson (2000) has revised and refined the method to include a systematic process of interpretation that is informed largely by hermeneutics. Providing a context for our discussion involving hermeneutics, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991) point to the evolution of hermeneutics:

The term *hermeneutics* originally referred to the discipline of interpreting ancient texts, but it has been extended to denote the entire phenomenon of interpretation, understood as *enactment* or *bringing forth* of meaning from a background of understanding. In general, Continental philosophers, even when they explicitly contest many of the assumptions underlying hermeneutics, have continued to produce detailed discussions that show how knowledge depends on being in a world that is inseparable from our bodies, our language, and our social history—in short, from our *embodiment*. (p. 149)

Varela et al. (1991) describe the recursive hermeneutical circle as an open ended inquiry which takes place in the context of our embodiment and cultural embeddedness. In his book, *The Body in the Mind*, Mark Johnson (1987) also stresses the importance of meaning as a fluid “event of understanding” (p. 175). Johnson suggests that meaning is only fixed in that “fixed meanings are merely sedimented or stabilized structures that emerge as recurring patterns in our understanding” (p. 175). The recursive hermeneutical circle is in a constant state of flux; it is an event of understanding taking place between subject and object, in the context of body, culture, language, and history. It is useful to consider intuitive inquiry as a research method which aims to know meaning as a changing event of understanding, rather than a fixed and solid reality.

Anderson (2000) states that “intuitive inquiry seeks to provide an approach to research that systematically incorporates both objective and subjective knowledge through a step-by-step interpretive process—cycles of interpretation that shape the ongoing inquiry” (p. 32). Through these cycles of interpretation, our understanding of a topic is expanded, challenged, refined, and often times changed.

Intuitive inquiry encourages the researcher to choose a topic, to be *claimed* by a topic (or text) that has passion and meaning, and one that is deeply personal and particular to the researcher. Anderson (2000) suggests that to truly know an experience, we must first open our hearts and love what we study. In doing this, “our loving approach brings the nature of the phenomenon studied alive to our senses” (p. 31). In a discussion on hermeneutics, Gerald L. Bruns (1992) articulates the strength with which a text (or topic) can ravish us: “Because of who we are and how we are situated the text has a claim on us, and part of what we understand is the substance and force of this claim, and also how we are to respond to it” (p. 11). Intuitive inquiry is not for the faint of heart, for it

invites us to allow for the possibility of being touched, surprised, challenged, or even ravished.

Once a topic has claimed us, Anderson (2000) describes the overall spiraling process of interpretation intrinsic to intuitive inquiry: “[T]he intuitive researcher initially identifies her or his values and assumptions through active and connected engagement with the experience studied and then uses these values and assumptions as hermeneutical lenses to explore and analyze similar experiences in others” (p. 32). Intuitive inquiry thus invites the researcher to engage in successive cycles of interpretation, a movement through the forward and return arc of the hermeneutical circle, to expand and deepen one’s understanding of a topic. This method also calls participants and eventually readers to take their own parallel journey through the interpretive inquiry, the hermeneutical circle.

Similar to other research approaches that are particularly well suited for studying transpersonal phenomena, consciousness, exceptional human experiences, and trans-egoic development (e.g., Braud, 1998; White, 1998), intuitive inquiry honors alternative ways of knowing and attends carefully to both subjective and objective nuances that arise throughout every stage of the research. In contrast to such methods as phenomenology, where the researcher brackets her or his assumptions so as not to bias the data, in intuitive inquiry those very assumptions are identified and utilized from the outset.

Projection (in the positive sense), those lenses or filters which we bring to every encounter, are made conscious in hermeneutic and intuitive research. In a discussion on empirical applications in hermeneutics, Martin J. Packer and Richard B. Addison (1989) elaborate:

Projection is, first of all, a structure of our way of being in the world, our living, our actions and interactions, before it characterizes our knowledge and our

sciences . . . Projection is an existential structure; our existence is such (unlike that of the objects around us) that we are thrown into future ways of acting that are made possible by our culture and personal history. We live toward a future whose possibilities are both created and limited by the present and the past.
(p. 34)

Further elucidating the consideration of projection, Anderson (2000) explains, “we cannot extricate ourselves from the interpretive dynamic of being human. We cannot honestly escape our attitudes and projections” (p. 34). In intuitive inquiry the process of bringing awareness to one’s initial values and assumptions, one’s projections, is called identifying interpretive lenses and is part of the forward arc of the hermeneutical circle.

In contrast to traditional content analysis, where overarching relatively objective themes are rendered, hermeneutics and intuitive inquiry seek to understand, open, expand, and illuminate an experience or phenomenon, fully bringing to light and incorporating the researcher’s filters and values. In a further elaboration on hermeneutics, Gerald L. Bruns (1992) posits,

Hence the idea that hermeneutics is a kind of phenomenology of the between. Its task is not, for example, to produce such events as translations of meaning, conversion experiences, cultural critiques, and new interpretations of Shakespeare; instead, it is to study these things (among endless others) for the light that they shed on its object, that is, the Sache of its thinking, namely the question of understanding. (pp. 11-12)

Bruns orients us to the interior and reflective vantage point of the hermeneutical endeavor when he suggests that

the hermeneutical point . . . is that the present task of understanding in the human sciences is not to reflect itself out of the situation in which it occurs; that is, the task of understanding is not to objectify itself but to reflect on itself and its situation critically in the light of what it discovers in its objects of study. (p. 8)

Anderson (2000) articulates the transformational possibilities inherent to this interior reflective process, namely that hermeneutical research is a method that may call forth in

the researcher an experience similar to that of contemplation, deep prayer, or an act of reverence:

In the best of circumstances, the hermeneutical process avers the transformative nature of engaging with an experience, which claims and compels the researcher to know and appreciate the experience studied in increasingly subtle and yet expanded ways as the inquiry continues. Often the researcher is transformed by this iterative hermeneutical endeavor; it can feel like a deep act of remembrance. (p. 32)

It is this aspect of intuitive inquiry, the possibility for transformation and deep remembrance through the study of a meaningful topic, that especially drew me to this method.

Throughout the intuitive inquiry process, the researcher is seeking understanding through a dialectical relationship with the textual data gathered, and with her or his own internal resonance to the text. A hermeneutical text may include the more conventional interview transcript or sacred text; or it could be a painting, song, or set of photographs; or it could be a screenplay, image, or poem. Broadly defining text, Anderson suggests that a topic or text may also be borne out of one's own personal experience, "as in the case of Heuristic Research (Moustakas, 1990) which uses the researcher's unique personal experience as the impetus and focal point of what might otherwise be called a hermeneutical process" (Anderson, 2000, p. 36). The intuitive researcher engages a text or topic as an act of reverence, abiding deep within one's interior experience and from there, listening for objective and subjective, rational and intuitive insights to emerge.

Anderson suggests:

Searching (or re-searching) from that inside view, its essential qualities animate to the researcher's own experience in both the objective and subjective senses. When they are cross-verified in both the mechanics of conventional objective science and in the more unconventional intuitive sense of the researcher, both objective and subjective knowing can contribute jointly to our understanding. (p. 31)

As a lover of many forms of contemplation, I found it liberating to encounter Anderson's research method, for it allowed me not only to study the objective dimensions of a topic, but also to bring my intuitive and contemplative self—my subjectivity—to the research endeavor.

Anderson (2000) defines intuition, as it is used in this approach, to include insights or thoughts derived from ordinary waking-state consciousness, “together with insights derived from non-rational processes such as dream images, visions, kinesthetic impressions, a felt (or proprioceptive) sense, an inner sense or taste accompanying contemplative practices and prayer, and spontaneous creative expressions in dance, sound, improvisation, writing, and visual art” (pp. 31-32). True to the method of hermeneutic and intuitive inquiry that informs this study, using self as instrument is fundamental to this research design. Anderson (1998) explains that,

Like heuristic methods, intuitive research methods emphasize the personal voice of the researcher and depend on the experiences and insights of the researcher at every phase of the research process. The depth of the researcher's intuitive understanding gives a universal voice and character to the research findings. Because the unique experience and voice of the researcher are essential to enlivening the research with depth of richness of inquiry and expression, this unique voice gives heuristic research and intuitive inquiry their fundamental character. (p. 76)

Because intuitive inquiry, like heuristic research, encourages the researcher to allow herself to touch and be deeply touched through the research, it is possible to be transformed in the process. While this prospect in many ways may appear enticing—it did to me—it is also an intimate and risky venture to dive deep into the waters of inquiry and change. Swimming through these unknown waters, it is likely that our assumptions and beliefs will be challenged, and at times we may even feel surprised or confused by what we discover. Of course, this is also an exciting stage in the research, one where we might wonder if the trickster is indeed at work (or play) with us.

Distinctly unique to intuitive inquiry is the bewilderment, contradiction, nuance, and sometimes confusion that is captured in the concept of trickstering:

In indigenous cultures worldwide, tricksters open gateways of awareness and insights. Tricksters are playful, mischievous, and sometimes outrageous. Particular to culture, coyotes, ravens, fairies, leprechauns, and pookas (a very Irish goblin) endow humans with insight, usually in the context of making us feel foolish. Coyotes play tricks. Ravens steal and turn the stolen goods into something else. Fairies appear as lovers. Leprechauns give us gold that disappears. Pookas gleefully take us for a riotous ride. They produce auspicious bewilderment!

In research, especially transpersonal research, auspicious bewilderment may signal the beginning of renewed understanding. (Anderson, 2000, p. 38)

Anderson stresses the importance of allowing oneself to be confused during research and to not know exactly where one is going at all times. She cautions the researcher to be wary of excessive confidence or “the belief that we know what we’re doing” (Anderson, 2000, p. 38), and encourages those using intuitive inquiry to continue to open to that which bewilders.

By continuing to remain open to change, Anderson’s research method has gone through its own evolution. Utilizing intuitive inquiry in its earliest version (which includes what is understood now to be only the first two cycles of the method), Anderson (1996) studied the characteristics of spontaneous and involuntary weeping. Her study was inspired by a personal experience of sacred weeping, and resulted in nine psycho-spiritual characteristics of this phenomenon. The very flavor of a hermeneutic inquiry as opposed to other methods is its explicit awareness and documentation of the researcher’s values, assumptions, insights, and intuitions, as well as the researcher’s personal hunger and inspiration to understand the topic.

Cycle 1 of intuitive inquiry, the claim of the text or topic, is considered part of the forward arc of the hermeneutical circle, or entering the circle. In this phase the researcher typically selects a text that she or he is repeatedly drawn to and compelled by, even when

the text does not immediately reveal an exact research question. Anderson suggests that the researcher engage the text on a daily basis, for a minimum of a half hour per day (or about an hour every other day). She recommends recording a wide range of both objective and subjective or intuitive impressions. This phase is important in that it sharpens the researcher's question into a researchable topic.

Still part of the forward arc, Cycle 2, developing interpretive lenses, is one where preliminary interpretive lenses are developed in response to a different set of texts. Anderson likens this initial stage to brainstorming, whereby themes and clusters of ideas are generated quickly, illuminating "the structure and accompanying values the researcher brings to the topic" (Anderson, 2000, p. 36). Continuing to engage the texts on a daily basis, the intuitive researcher identifies, hones, and refines patterns, clusters, and lenses until a select few emerge.

The return arc of the hermeneutical circle is characterized by Cycle 3, engaging the text of others. At this point the researcher collects original empirical data to further expand, redefine, or clarify the research topic by engaging or "spiraling in the experiences of others" (Anderson, 2000, p. 37). As the researcher analyzes her or his own interpretive lenses in conjunction with the themes that arise from the various texts, "the researcher's initial hermeneutical lenses are modified, expanded, and honed through successive comparisons with the relayed experience of others. Specific interpretations develop through modification, amplification, and discrimination" (Anderson, 2000, p. 32). Through a dialectic process between the subjectivity of the researcher and the objectivity of that which is being studied, final lenses are distilled. These might be termed lenses, interpretations, understandings, characteristics, or themes. In this study, I use the

terms *lenses*, *interpretations*, and *understandings* interchangeably to describe my essential findings gleaned through Cycle 3 of intuitive inquiry.

Once a final list of lenses has been distilled from the various forms of data, the researcher may choose to utilize a resonance panel as Cycle 4 of interpretation, a means of furthering validity and reliability. Typically, a resonance panel will consist of participants who have knowledge or expertise in the particular area of study. These people will then be exposed to a portion of the study and provide feedback regarding the researcher's analysis. For this study, due to time constraints, I did not choose to employ a resonance panel. Finally, in the discussion section of the findings, the researcher may choose to contextualize the findings in relationship to the literature previously reviewed.

For this dissertation research I entered the hermeneutical circle, Cycle 1, by opening to non-rational ways of gathering information—through dreams, imagination, prayer, tricksters, and synchronicity. Once I had a general sense of my topic, I then engaged various texts over a sustained period of time in order to clarify my research question. In Cycle 2, I engaged a different set of texts to illuminate initial interpretive lenses, observing and noting a variety of initial responses, intuitions, values, assumptions, and interpretations. These lenses over time were refined, expanded, and distilled to broaden my understanding of the research question. The return arc of the hermeneutical circle, Cycle 3, included interviews with 12 contemporary female mystics. After this original data was gathered, I then engaged the texts (the interview transcripts) that arose from these dialogues as a way to further clarify, deepen, challenge, and expand my interpretive lenses and overall understanding of the topic. At the conclusion of this study, one central theme and 12 additional themes had emerged.

Ontogeny, Indwelling, and Incubating the Data

Three important features of intuitive inquiry—ontogeny, indwelling, and incubating the data—deserve further elaboration here, as they were crucial elements in my specific interpretation of intuitive inquiry. As Anderson (2000) elucidates, “*Ontogeny*, derived from the Greek word *einai* meaning ‘to be,’ and *genes* meaning ‘born,’ signifies a course of development. The researcher positions the inquiry from within her or his unique and personal experience” (p. 34). Anderson once again stresses the importance of a personal connection, or resonance, between researcher, topic, and design:

The researcher’s intrigue and inspiration matter too in lending the research endeavor a special verve and standpoint. By employing those experiences, motivations, and inspirations, the intuitive researcher rallies a vantage point uniquely her or his own. Like a specially designed telescope, the lenses of the researcher’s experiences, motivations, and inspirations permit the intuitive researcher to see more subtly into the phenomenon being studied and to relate to it in a deeply connected way. (p. 34)

The present study arose out of a personal transformative experience which I elaborate on in my discussion of Cycle 1, the claim of the text. For now, I will explain briefly that it was my own intimate experience of the tension between spirit and flesh, borne out of a spiritual experience, that led me to this research method, topic, and design. Many times over the course of several years when I incubated this dissertation topic, did I consider another topic—something perhaps a little less personal. Over and over, however, my topic pursued me until, eventually, I surrendered to the encounter.

A second aspect of intuitive inquiry that was especially important in this dissertation is the concept of indwelling, which is borrowed from heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). Clark Moustakas (1990) captures beautifully the process of indwelling:

It involves a willingness to gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and its wholeness. To understand something fully, one dwells inside the subsidiary and focal factors to draw from them every possible nuance, texture, fact, and meaning. (p. 24)

Illustrating how all-encompassing, non-linear, and organic the research process can be in moments, Anderson (2000) explains:

Indwelling on a particular facet of human experience often becomes a preoccupying feature of the researcher's daily activities. Everything may become raw material for scrutiny: relationships, dreams, bumper stickers, newspaper articles, chance encounters, casual conversations, and synchronistic events such as unexpected phone calls or visits. (p. 38)

Throughout this research, indwelling—staring inward with naked awareness at the phenomena of spirit and flesh—has occurred both formally and informally. It has taken place as much through reviewing the relevant literature as it has through extended periods on the meditation cushion, moments of making love, conversations with friends, dreaming, and walking in the wilderness.

Considering the fact that this entire research project has spanned over three years, I had ample time to be immersed in the topic for a number of concentrated periods throughout those years. An example illustrating such a period includes a Vajrayana Buddhist meditation retreat that I participated in during year two of writing this dissertation. On this particular retreat we studied the practice of Powa, the ancient method of working with one's consciousness in the moments just after death, to separate spirit from the body. This experience invited me to gaze for an extended period of time into the dynamic tension of spirit and flesh.

Incubating the data, a third feature of intuitive inquiry that was particularly important to this study and borrowed too from heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990), points to the notion that much of the creative process takes place while the researcher

rests, relaxes, and gently moves one's concentrated focus away from the topic. Also elaborated on in heuristic research methods, incubating the data is just that—a period of incubation or fermentation, where the creative process continues but perhaps the work is occurring slightly beneath the surface of one's ordinary consciousness. Over the course of this study there have been several periods of incubation.

In part due to some major life changes that occurred while writing this dissertation—a move to a new city, the purchasing of my first home, a divorce, a flu that landed me in the hospital, and a wonderful new job—for several periods after my interviews were completed, I did not formally work with my data. Throughout these periods I felt that the texts (transcriptions of the interviews) were still abiding, sifting, and settling within me—ripening, gestating, incubating. During these times when I was not formally working with the data, an idea, insight, or portion of an interview would still arise in my mind. In those moments, I noted the various thoughts, jotted them down, and returned to them after that particular period of incubation was complete. I have come to see these periods of incubation, and the life events that precipitated them, as integral to this dissertation research. For not only were my beliefs regarding the body and spirit being transformed throughout this study, entire aspects of my identity (as a wife, and an exceptionally healthy person, for instance) were being dissolved and reconstituted during this time.

Sympathetic Resonance

A final feature of intuitive inquiry that deserves mention here, both because of its inherent significance in this method as well as its relevance to this particular study, is the principal of sympathetic resonance. Anderson (2000) suggests that this notion is best understood through an analogy:

If one plucks a string on a cello on one side of a room, a string of a cello on the opposite side will begin to vibrate, too. Striking a tuning fork will vibrate another tuning fork some distance away. The resonance communicates and connects directly and immediately without intermediaries (except for the conduits of air and space). The principal of sympathetic resonance introduces resonance as a validation procedure for the researcher's particular intuitive insights and syntheses. (p. 33)

Anderson goes on to suggest that, like poetry, research has the capacity to touch us with the immediacy of a recognition or remembrance. This type of direct apprehension is most often associated with the arts and mysticism, and certainly less often with the science of empirical research. Anderson is participating in the creation of a synthesis between these two worlds, a marriage between the objective and subjective, reason and intuition, mind and heart.

The Claim of the Text: Cycle 1

The present study arose out of a transformative personal experience that left in its wake haunting questions about spirit and flesh. This spiritual experience impacted me so greatly that I left school for a quarter to allow sufficient space and energy to be available to the process as it unfolded. When I returned to my graduate studies several months later, I wrote about the experience through embodied writing. The practice of using embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) to describe the experience from the inside out, helped to deepen and expand my understanding of the experience itself. It also assisted me in integrating into my body this new knowledge that had arisen out of the experience. I have included this piece of writing as an appendix (see Appendix A) because I believe this experience was a central factor that brought me to this topic, and illuminated for me the need to understand the body in relationship to spirit more deeply.

During an early stage of Cycle 1, a time prior to beginning my formal engagement with a text, I recall one of the first moments when clarity broke through in relation to my

topic. I was still uncertain as to what I wanted to study, though I sensed it would be related to the transformational experience referred to previously. I was taking a research class with Rosemarie Anderson at the time, and I was searching for a text to work with to assist me in discovering my exact research question. In class one day we had been discussing the concept of indwelling (Anderson, 2000), looking at the various ways in which the intuitive inquiry researcher opens herself to non-rational insights and intuitions, as a way of gathering information about one's topic. As previously outlined, this might include information gained through dreams, prayer, movement, synchronistic events, road signs—the possibilities are endless.

As I drove home late that night, winding my way up a dark, forested mountain road, I prayed out loud. I asked God for my research topic to please be revealed to me. Moments later an insight flashed in me: *spirit and body, something about spirit and the body!* During the same moment I noticed an owl flying closely above my car, winding its way up the narrow mountain road for what seemed to be an inordinately long amount of time. I believe that that was the moment when I discovered my topic. I later attempted to make sense of that experience, and in particular, the role that the owl played in revealing my topic to me. The owl is often associated with silent wisdom, vision in the dark, and is a symbol of the feminine (Andrews, 2000). I came to understand that encounter as one where the owl was helping to illuminate my topic. In the blackness of the unclarity with which my topic was immersed, it is as if the owl with its great vision shone a glaring spotlight on my topic. The message I took away from that encounter was, *This is your topic. Grab it!*

When it became clear enough that my topic had something to do with the tension between spirit and the body, transcendence and immanence, the eternal and the temporal,

I began to work with two texts that repeatedly drew me. The first text is portions taken from the Tibetan Buddhist practice Chöd, sung by the dakini Machig Labdrön. The second text is a portion of a poem by the Christian poet William Everson. I have included these two texts as well as all of the texts used in Cycles 1 and 2, as appendixes (see Appendixes B & C). My intention is that the reader have the possibility of encountering this dissertation in an experiential manner, engaging the same texts that I did and drawing one's own conclusions and interpretations. During this first cycle of interpretation, I worked with each text formally for a period of 14 days. My intention was to hone and clarify my research topic.

First, I worked with the words of Machig Labdrön (Edou, 1996) daily, for 14 days. During that period, each day I spent 30 minutes reading the text aloud. I experimented with various ways of engaging the text—sometimes I softly whispered her words, other times I chanted, shouted, or sang the words. Usually I sat on my meditation cushion as I read, though at times I got up and moved my body between or during readings. As I read the text, I noted thoughts, images, associations, beliefs, feelings, and sensations that arose within me, and recorded them in a notebook. Through the practice of engaging with this particular text I primarily became aware of the importance of, and my belief in, transcendence from the body as an important aspect of spiritual development.

Originally I had thought that the Chöd text would be the only text I would use during Cycle 1. However, after engaging the above mentioned text, it became clear to me that this step essentially helped to illuminate one aspect of my research topic—namely, disidentification from the body. It felt incomplete, though, to then go on to Cycle 2 of my

research process without first engaging a text that illustrated more explicitly the other end of the spectrum—the importance of our flesh, sexuality, and embodiment.

With this in mind, I waited a few weeks and then chose a portion of a poem by William Everson (1978) to work with, one that highlighted a different aspect of embodiment. While I worked with this text in all the same ways as described previously with Machig's text, in this stage I added an additional dimension to the process. I sensed that not only did I want to read the text, but I wanted it to be read aloud *to me*. I wanted to let the poetry wash over me, to be bathed in and ravished by the text. I felt that this text, especially, called for a certain quality of surrender. To make this possible, I recorded myself reading Everson's words, and then alternated between reading the poem, and listening to the poem daily, for 14 days. In addition to all the variety of types of responses (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) outlined with the previous text, during this stage I especially became aware of sensual and sexual feelings that arose with the readings. These were usually intertwined with what might be called a holy or sublime longing, an ache that was sometimes felt in my heart, and in other moments experienced throughout my entire body. All of these responses were recorded in a notebook. After working with these two texts, my research topic felt clarified in a broad, general sense. At this point, I knew that I was repeatedly drawn toward an inquiry into spirit and the body that had something to do with transcendence, sexuality, women, and notions of the self. I was then ready to move into the second cycle of interpretation.

Developing Interpretive Lenses: Cycle 2

During Cycle 2 of interpretation, I worked with two texts. This cycle lasted six weeks. First, for one month I worked with excerpts from a book by the contemporary mystic Janet Adler (1995). Daily, I engaged Adler's text in a similar fashion as in Cycle

1, though I did not record and play back the readings with any text other than Everson's. I documented my responses in a notebook. After the period of working with Adler's text was complete, I then worked for 14 days with a Sufi song performed by a female artist Zuleikha, the lyrics of which came originally from a poem by the Sufi woman mystic, Rabia. This song had particular relevance to me in that it was a song that had haunted me since the spiritual experience I mentioned previously (described in Appendix A), so obviously it was not new to me. This stage included 30-minute sessions over 14 days. Each session consisted of engaging the music—the text—through listening to the song, singing, prayer, and movement. During and after each session, I recorded my responses in a notebook. I have included each of these texts as appendixes (see Appendixes D & E). Throughout Cycle 1, my primary intention was to clarify my research topic, while in Cycle 2, I began to look for emerging themes, values, assumptions—all of which would eventually become my preliminary lenses.

The next phase, generating my preliminary lenses, occurred over the next three or so months. It is not that this phase necessarily required that amount of time. Both life circumstances, as well as an intuitive sense that the data needed to be incubated for a few months, contributed to this time frame. After working with the various texts intensively during Cycles 1 and 2, it seemed that my psyche needed to *be with* the emerging themes over an extended period of time. This allowed ideas, associations, dreams, visions, proprioceptions, and images to bubble up on their own, in their own time.

During the first month of this three month period, I spent one full day immersing myself in the various notes I had taken thus far, including my notes from both Cycles 1 and 2. On this particular day, I sat on the floor of my office loft and spread my notes around me in a circle on the floor. I then read out loud everything I had written, to get a

sense of the whole picture up until this point. After spending a few hours engaging the notes I had made to myself, I was ready to begin to generate a preliminary list of lenses about my understanding of this whole vast area we call *body*—in relationship to spirit, sexuality, death, and the self. This included my thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideas about the body. I then worked with this list over another few hours, omitting repetitive ideas, looking for themes, and refining my words. It is important to note, however, that this whole process had a quickness to it. In other words, it seemed important at this early stage of the research to not edit myself too closely, nor get tight in my thinking. While I wanted to refine my ideas, I also wanted to continue to expand them. I thought that if I allowed the process to move rather rapidly I had a better chance of accessing my unconscious, rather than merely my conscious mind.

The following is a list of initial lenses that arose out of this second cycle of interpretation:

1. Inquiring into the tension between spirit and the body enlivens one's felt sense of living as a body.
2. Transcendence or disidentification from one's body (or the realization of the body as impermanent) can produce the experience of freedom and liberation.
3. I am not the body.
4. The body is impermanent.
5. Spirit, that which animates our fleshly form, is eternal.
6. Spirit transcends flesh, meaning spirit encompasses flesh.
7. Part of being human includes fear of the death of this physical form, the body.
8. There is a felt sense that at times awareness expands beyond the boundaries of my body, though it includes my body.

9. Sometimes it feels like spirit, or awareness, is located outside or behind (my head, to be exact) my body.
10. Form, flesh is temporal.
11. It is useful (as a spiritual practice) to contemplate death, the eventual end of our physical form.
12. Energy animates our physical body.
13. Evolution of consciousness includes facing our mortality.
14. Physical sensations of energy bring up a fear response (kundalini rising).
15. Energy that animates the body is benign and even has healing capacities.
16. Sexuality is body bound.
17. Transcendence is preferred over the body realm.
18. Awareness exists after death.
19. An interconnection exists between body and spirit.
20. Women are more embodied than men.

Once my initial lenses were generated, I was ready to begin Cycle 3 of the intuitive inquiry research.

Engaging the Text of Others: Cycle 3

The Participants: Contemporary Female Mystics

I was interested in finding women to participate in the study who were spiritual teachers, mentors, or longtime spiritual practitioners who ideally represented a variety of traditions and who were ethnically diverse. Of particular interest to me was the diversity factor, especially regarding spiritual tradition and ethnicity. This was because I knew that one considerable limitation of the study was that, most likely, all of my participants would be California residents. My hope was to balance that limitation with a diversity of

spiritual tradition, and ethnicity, as well as age. My intention was to draw participants from a variety of mystical traditions including Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Sufism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, African Spirituality, Native American Shamanism, as well as other less conventional traditions.

The process of determining whom I solicited to participate in this study was an organic one. I knew that I was seeking to find a diverse group of women who were perceived by a community of spiritual or religious students, seekers, or colleagues, to be inspiring spiritual or religious exemplars, teachers, or elders. I also knew that I was seeking to find women who had devoted a significant portion of their lives to spiritual practice, devotion, inquiry, or service. An important factor in this part of the research was simply what contacts I made or already had, who was recommended to me, who was willing to “endorse” my project to potential participants, and who was available given the many other commitments in life. This last factor, availability, was of particular importance in that the nature of the women whom I sought to be in the study were generally very busy people with large demands on their time.

The process of finding participants happened in a few fits and starts. Toward the beginning of Cycle 3 about half of my participants came to me through people who had learned about my study from someone mentoring me in the dissertation (my committee members, primarily). How this happened was that people such as my committee members either gave me names of women whom they thought I should contact or, first checked in with these women, informed them of my study, and then gave me the go-ahead to contact each person. The process usually began with a phone call (though occasionally email was our first contact) from me to the potential participant. I still have my “script” from those

very early calls, notes to myself about how to introduce myself and the topic. My notes read:

Hello. My name is Vipassana Esbjörn. Your name was given to me by _____ . I am a doctoral student at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California. I am calling because I am currently doing research for my dissertation on embodiment in contemporary female mystics, and I'm wondering if you would consider allowing me to interview you for my study?

I then gave my contact information including phone number and email address. I was surprised at how quickly most women called me back after this initial phone call, usually within the same day. For those women who said they would participate, we set up interview details. All but two interviews took place at the home of the woman I was interviewing.

Once I had about 6 participants who had agreed to be in the study, I conducted an additional pilot interview prior to my formal interviews. My pilot interview was conducted with a woman professor whom I had known briefly for a few years, someone whom I understood to care deeply about this topic. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will use the pseudonym "Mariah" to refer to this participant. At the request of Mariah, I will not include data from that interview in this dissertation. Rather than explicitly utilizing the content that was generated from that interview, instead, the interview served as a procedural "run through" stage of the research. It gave me an opportunity to gain feedback on both my interview questions as well as the format for the interview.

In the end, the participants for my study were 12 contemporary female mystics. Of the 12 women who ultimately participated in my study, seven of them came to the study as a result of a friend or colleague of theirs who knew of my work and endorsed the project. Of the additional five participants, three of the women I had met previously, though I did not know them well, and the other two women I knew significantly well. I

contacted each of the five women and invited them to participate in the study. The women who ended up participating in the study represent mystical traditions and spiritual paths that include Christianity, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, African Spirituality, Yoga, Indian Tantra, Authentic Movement, and Diamond Logos. Their ages range from 40 to 76. One participant is Chinese-American, one is African-American, and the others are European-American.

Data-Gathering

With each participant I conducted an in-depth interview that ranged from 50 minutes to 3 hours. A semi-structured interview format as described by Jonathan Smith (1995) was used for my interviews. In contrast to a structured interview that uses brief and specific questions, exact adherence to the interview schedule, and an overall format that is similar to a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview is just that, semi-structured. Because the topic that I was investigating speaks to the broad yet subtle relationship of spirit and the body for contemporary female mystics, an interview with many open-ended questions that could catch the nuances and subtleties of a person's experience seemed particularly appropriate. Smith explains that, "semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis are especially suitable where one is particularly interested in complexity or process or where an issue is controversial or personal" (1995, p. 10). While my intention was to bring particular questions to the interviews through which to guide our discussion, I was also willing to follow my participant's lead if she should "digress" and move into unexpected terrain. The interview process spanned over a six month period. I tape recorded all interviews.

My first interview was the pilot interview. A few aspects of the pilot interview that most stand out in the shaping of my 12 formal interviews pertain to an intended

meditation period prior to the beginning of the interview, and the languaging of my interview questions. At the start of the interview we first talked about the format. I asked Mariah for feedback regarding a tentative plan I had for beginning each interview by inviting my participant to lead us in a five minute period of meditation of her choosing. I was unsure as to whether this felt right to me. My concern was that this might put my participants in an awkward position, as they did not consent previously to leading us in a meditation. Also, time was a factor. In some cases interviews were as short as 50 minutes because that is what some people could afford. Given the fact that I had a great deal of material I hoped to cover during the interview, even a short meditation at the beginning would make a difference in our time. While Mariah and I decided to begin the interview with a five minute period of silence, in the formal interviews I decided not to include a mediation at the beginning for the reasons just stated.

The second most important aspect of the pilot interview was the feedback I received from Mariah, and the discussion that followed, regarding the languaging of my interview questions. She highlighted for me the ways in which my wording of the questions carried certain assumptions and values that were not previously apparent to me. The main assumption or belief that Mariah perceived in my interview questions exposed a dichotomy between spirit and the body, emptiness and form. She said to me that my questions presupposed an “either/or” perspective on spirit and the body. Through the discussion with Mariah both before and immediately after my interview with her, I clarified the questions that I would use for the formal interviews. Also through my discussion with Mariah, what became apparent was the importance of defining what I meant by *embodiment*.

After the pilot interview, and while I was still soliciting additional participants, I started the formal interview process. At the beginning of each interview I opened with a short explanation regarding my interest in the topic—which at that time I was calling *embodiment*—and then went on to explain how I was using the term embodiment. I introduced the topic by stating the following:

My research explores embodiment. People often tend to think of the body as temporal and spirit or consciousness as eternal. The way I am using the term embodiment is to point to the experience of body and spirit coming together. The overall research areas I would like to explore in this interview are the body—in relation to spirit, sexuality, and death.

I then introduced my consent form (see Appendix F) and asked each participant to read and sign the consent form. At that point I invited participants to either choose a pseudonym to be used during the study, or if they preferred, have me select one for them. I went on to ask a few brief demographic questions, as well as a general question about family of origin. I invited each participant to reflect on this by saying,

Without going into much detail, would you describe your childhood relationship with both your mother and father as being ones of closeness and comfort? If no, what few words might describe the emotional/psychological climate of those relationships?

My intention in soliciting a brief reflection on family of origin was so that each woman's responses could be situated within the context of her life. I then proceeded with the heart of the interview. My interview questions were as follows:

1. As a woman deeply embedded in the spiritual life, could you talk about how you experience and give meaning to your body?
2. Is there a tradition that informs your perspective? How so?
3. How has your experience of sexuality transformed, if at all, throughout your spiritual life?
4. Has your physical body changed as you have developed or awakened spiritually? How so?

5. Do you experience your sense of 'I' or self as having a location, a reference point in or including your body?
6. Could you talk about your relationship to death and the body?

After the interview I invited each participant to contact me with any further thoughts or questions. All but one interview took place in one sitting. The exception to this was with one participant, where after 1 and 1/2 hours it became evident that we were only about half way through the interview. At that point I suggested we meet the following week to complete the rest of the interview, and that is what happened. At the end of each interview, I communicated to each person that I would be sending to them a copy of their signed consent form, as well as an interview transcript for their review.

Throughout the interview process I hired two professional transcribers to do the transcription for me, as each interview was completed. While I would have ideally liked to have done the transcription myself, I made the choice to hire professional transcribers simply because I am a very slow typist. As it was, over the course of the next year, I worked intensively with the transcripts—editing, and many times re-editing, and editing again—so that I came to experience a deep intimacy with the written text. At first I understood this editing process to be “preparation” for the interpretive process in Cycle 3, only later to recognize that the interpretation began as soon as I started to work with the texts.

Spiraling Through the Texts & Conversations with the Women

Because the interviews were semi-structured in nature and they varied in length, I chose to create a “portrait” of each woman by editing down the original interview for greater clarity, precision, grammatical accuracy, and sense of flow. The interpretation began, therefore, through the process of deciding what to include and what to leave out from the original transcript. In addition to sending each participant a copy of the entire

transcribed interview, I then later sent an edited transcript for review along with a letter (see Appendix G for a sample letter). In this letter I invited participants to make changes, omissions, additions, or clarifications to the edited transcript. I also stated in the letter that if I did not hear from a participant by a certain date (usually several months away) I would assume I could proceed with their permission. I did this because I wanted to reduce the work for each participant, by not requiring them to respond to me, and also so that I could ultimately proceed even if I did not hear back from each person.

I did eventually communicate with all but one participant after the initial interviews. In the case of this one person, who I know to have intense demands on her time and is a person who is largely in the public eye, I made several attempts to communicate with her. My concern was that, although she signed the original consent form and was anonymous in the study, I wanted to be sure that she still consented after reviewing my edited version of her transcript. To be certain that she received my communications, I sent two letters and the edited transcript to her home; I sent two emails, one of which included the interview transcript; and left three phone messages for her over the course of several months. In the end I never heard back, and so I presumed that I still had her original permission to use her words in my study.

During the editing and revision process, two of my participants made the request that their real names be used in the study. The reason, for both of them, was that since they are in the public eye through both published work and public teaching, it seemed that it would take more effort (with many details being changed) to preserve their anonymity, than to allow their identity to be known. I brought this request to my dissertation committee, who then considered it together with the ethics committee at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP). After several months I learned that in this

situation, at the request of my participants, it would be permitted for their true names to be used in the study. The reason that ITP took so long deliberating over this request was that it stands as a major exception to ITP's ethics rule. Therefore, in all but two cases pseudonyms are used to identify participants. On the other hand, when both a first and last name is used, that signals to the reader that what is being used is the participant's true name.

In most cases, during the revision process I went back and forth with participants one or two times. This consisted of my participants revising the text as they saw fit, and then me entering in those changes, until a final product was created. In two cases, that process went through about five or six rounds of revisions. In two other cases, the participants themselves made changes directly to the text and then emailed back to me a revised transcript. This process of editing, and then subsequent revisions, took far longer than I anticipated. This was in terms of the many hours over the course of many months it took to first, substantially edit the raw transcripts and second, make the revisions as they came in. Early on there was also a stage in which I went back to the audio version of the interview to clarify certain words or portions of the text that were unclear or undecipherable to the transcriber. In the end, I had the feeling that I *had* participated in at least a portion of the transcribing process, and for this I was grateful.

The process of identifying Cycle 3 lenses was both long and immediate. As intuitive inquiry recommends, while I worked with the transcripts over the course of one year I noted significant themes, insights, intuitions, dreams, and especially sympathetic resonance with the text. This was the "long" part of the research process. It was as if over the course of this year I was noting all sorts of various themes and insights, but keeping at bay or postponing formulating any conclusions. I think I wanted to allow the themes to

gestate in me at an unconscious or semi-conscious level for as long as possible, until I was ready to bring my analytical mind into the process. It was not until I began to draft the discussion chapter that my final lenses came into being.

Considering the Discussion Chapter

I worked with the data for over a year, while postponing the step of consciously developing final lenses. When I finally sat down to tackle this task, I found that the lenses in many ways were already living in me. The task at this point was more a matter of languaging what I had been discovering over the course of my engagement with the text, as opposed to creating or generating lenses that were altogether new or unformulated. I spent about one weekend articulating my final lenses, which emerged from me with relative fluidity. It was then over the course of the next few weeks that I came to perceive the three categories of lenses. These final lenses will be explored in depth in the last chapter of this dissertation, the discussion chapter.

As you read on it is important to note that I came into this study with a set of beliefs and a history of experiences that shape the way I perceive the world around me and the data with which I come into contact. It is essential then, to state from the outset that I do not intend to present myself as a neutral researcher, though it is my intention to make every effort to identify and make explicit my assumptions. I entered the dissertation process with a set of beliefs about the nature of reality, specifically, that it includes both temporal matter and eternal spirit. My beliefs about spirituality generally could be described as coming out of the Buddhist tradition, though my thinking about these matters has also largely been influenced by Advaita-Vedanta philosophy. My personal history is such that I entered this study with an intimate experience of wrestling with what it means to be incarnated as a human.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter contains portraits, edited interview transcripts from each of the 12 women participants interviewed in this study. Prior to each portrait is a brief biographical introduction on each participant. To assist the reader with a sense of flow throughout the portraits, I use the symbol § to denote a significant change in the topic of our dialogue.

My hope is that as the reader, you might enter into your own dialogue with the text. When encountering the stories and the wisdom woven through these pages, I invite you to view these stories through the lens of your own life. Can you notice particularly what has resonance for you as reader? Note the various thoughts, images, associations, feelings, and sensations that arise in you as you engage each woman's story.

Women's Voices

Catherine

Catherine is a Caucasian, 76-year-old Roman Catholic nun. She became a Sister at the age of 20. She offers spiritual direction to young and older women and men. Catherine lives in Berkeley, California.

I suppose if I began with my early life and probably into teenage years, the kind of theology and the kind of spirituality I suspect that was presented to us as youngsters was more mistrust of the body, not negation so much, but mistrust. The body was something that one had to bear that was part of existence. The best way to tame the body, or to treat the body was to ignore it or fight against whatever temptations might be there, or things that were classified as temptations. The body really had a more negative connotation in my early theology and spirituality. It was a dichotomy, a neat dichotomy between flesh and spirit that goes way back to ancient times.

The dualism kind of thing that was philosophically from the Greeks, matter and spirit, took root in the Christian church and churches. I would say mainline Protestantism is certainly the same. And it was the same in the interpretation of scripture, use of the word *world*—leave the world, or slough off the world—the interpretation of that as meaning everything that was bodily, worldly. When we talked about worldliness we seemed to indicate that anything that wasn't spirit was worldly. And that takes deep root in somebody. It took deep root in me.

To be a spiritual person one had to somehow emphasize that spirit part of oneself to the negation, maybe it's more indifference, to the bodily part of oneself, not really paying it much respect or even attention. Of course, as youngsters, kids, women, children, and young women, we took good care of our bodies. That was part of growing up, doing your hair and doing all of these nice teenage things. I can't say that I was a person who said, "Off with the body." Not at all. But all the way through it was preached to me, I would imagine, and taught to me, that to be a spiritual person meant that that was much higher than the bodily person. Even as youngsters that was ingrained in us. When I became a religious Roman Catholic Sister, it was even more.

I entered the congregation I belong to at 20. In religious life as we lived it then, even more the emphasis was on not punishing the body exactly, but keeping it in line, while emphasizing the spirit and the spiritual part of oneself. I think that for a number of years that was the way that I dealt with my body. And it would mainly be seen as, for me anyway, not being very attentive to the body. The things you had to do you had to do. You had to eat, sleep, dress, and do all the bodily functions. But I never saw those as part of my spiritual life. They were definitely separate, and my spiritual life was on another plane. That was a very long period of time.

§

Gradually incarnational spirituality began to take a little more root in both my theology and spirituality. That for me was a release. It was a wonderful thing. It was very hard to be so mortified, to see the body as something that needed to be kept under control and tamed. I see discipline as a good thing, but it was a more exaggerated form of discipline, I think now. The body was something to be, maybe not ashamed of, but somewhat suspect. Now I don't see that at all. To be bodily, to be a bodily person is to be a whole person. And if one negates the body or dismisses it or doesn't bother looking at it, then I think one is doing a disservice to the reality that is oneself, and therefore a disservice to the God who created you. So I see it in a totally different light today from those early beginnings. But it's been a long road, a long road with many windings and many struggles along the way. I'd say today I see the body as the only way we can live and go to God, because that's who we are. We are embodied people.

I was beginning to read more on incarnational theology and spirituality. Do you know what? I would say a lot of it was just plain common sense. I began to see that the world was not what we were denying. The world was good, I mean, I just felt that in my bones. The world, meaning people, creation, everything, was good and God-given. So it was reading and my own gut reaction to things that I had to admit was part of this. I couldn't buy into, totally, a negation kind of approach to the world. I can say that from the beginning of religious life I saw some things that we were told were good to do, as stupid.

I can give a marvelous example. We had this custom of having a snack in mid-day, after maybe 10:00 a.m. When I was a young novice, we had this snack on a little balcony overlooking a lake. We were supposed to turn and face the wall so we wouldn't

be looking at the lake, because it was mortification to do that: mortifying the senses, mortifying the eyes. I thought, that is so crazy. I didn't always think that for I was a good, obedient sister, so I faced the wall. But inside of me there was something that said, why are we not looking at that beautiful lake? Others have said the same thing. So we went with the program, most of us. All of us I guess who stayed went with the program, but I think we questioned more and more things that didn't make sense. So it wasn't always reading or getting into a new incarnational theology, philosophy, and spirituality. It was just something in our very beings that said, this is stupid, this is nonsense. Facing the wall instead of the lake, ridiculous.

People began to write about the world not being interpreted as the beauty and the grandeur of the world, but the evil that's in the world. Things began to be written that said, no, wait a minute, we're off the track here. There's something amiss. The big thing was Jesus. Why did Jesus take on flesh and become man? This is kind of crazy if this is something that's not good. I'm overemphasizing the dichotomy a bit here because it wasn't that clear cut, it wasn't black and white. It never was. But the emphasis, that's what it is, the emphasis was on the spiritual as opposed to the material. Whereas that began subtly to change. I think the basis of that change was a sense: Aren't we off track if we see the incarnation as something good, then what's the matter here? What's amiss? So both in reading and in my own, what I would call common sense reactions to things, I began to be verified. But there were struggles.

I think one of the main struggles that I had was when I was living with an experimental community. There was a married couple, a priest, and myself, and two babies were born while we were living in this community. Everybody had permission to do this experiment. I just loved those two babies. I was in a position where I needed to

help and take care of them, I needed to be part of that family. I went through a bit of a struggle. Do I love these kids too much? Is this somehow not for me? Is it against my vow of chastity, or what is going on here? And I began to think, how silly, how stupid you are. These little children are a gift of God to you at this point in your life. Love them, accept them. So my own inner being told me I was silly to look at it this way. And I've loved those kids ever since. They're grown adults now and we have a wonderful bond. It's a beautiful gift and I see it as that. But I had to go through that little bit of a struggle: Is this somehow compromising the promise I made, the vow I made to be a celibate woman? You idiot, of course not! This is part of love, and if you weren't a loving woman, how could you be a human woman? How could you even be a celibate woman? It doesn't mean not to be loving, it means to be loving in another way. But it means loving, and don't count that out.

§

I would say I was a normal kid, but always a little fearful of my sexuality, even as a young woman. My mother was a very reticent woman to talk about sexuality. In fact when I first menstruated, I didn't know what was happening because she hadn't told me. My sexuality was there . . . and I was a little bit afraid of it. Then coming into the convent, I'll never forget. It was assumed we knew what we were getting into, which was crazy. I remember our mistress of novices, the trainer, the teacher, she was an old Irish lady, a beautiful woman. We had to study our vows, the vows we took—poverty, chastity and obedience. I think we started with poverty. We studied it very thoroughly, what it meant to live as a poor person, which isn't really materially poor, but what does it mean in this particular context of religious life? What does our poverty mean? We dealt with that beautifully. We came to chastity and of course it's written in the rule book. She

looked at it and said, “Well, you all know about that. Let’s skip that.” When I look back on that, I think, that’s how they treated it. To look at the old rule and the way it was worded, the kind of vow you’re taking and the way it’s worded now, it’s like night and day. It’s unbelievable. The way it was worded in our constitution in the early days was, “The Sister shall not have particular friendships.” It’s all negative. You renounce marriage. Today, it’s positive: “It’s the loving woman who shows her love this way. This is the way.” But not to show love would be ridiculous, would be silly. So I was still afraid, obviously, of my sexuality. And any kinds of feelings or movements, I’d be scared to death. When I think of it now, I look at myself and say, poor little girl.

I remember one priest I was working with, I really just loved him and admired him. One day he turned to me and said, “You know I love you, don’t you?” And I said, “Oh yeah, sure.” I was so frightened, it was like my whole inner self ran the other way. Well, we still correspond to this day. I love him dearly. And I think, you know, all you should have done at that time was give him a big hug and say, “I love you too, and we’re both committed and we know it. And isn’t it great?” But I couldn’t do that then, I was too frightened interiorly. How to move from that point, to an acceptance of sexuality as good and part of life? How did that happen to me? I wish I knew. I think maybe living in that family situation helped a lot. That was a gift to me.

I began to see myself as human, as being normal like everybody else, as having feelings like everybody else. And it being okay, it being all right. I was accepting myself as I was, little by little. But it was a struggle, as I look at it now. That was a very big movement in my life toward accepting my bodyliness as good. Not as just good, but precious. So I’d say from those days on I lived more peacefully. Not just peacefully, but joyfully in the woman I am. And now I’m more able to deal with people, women

especially, who are struggling. I work with not just religious women, but women who aren't religious at all who have struggles along these lines. I work with those who have trouble accepting themselves, accepting the being they are totally.

I don't think when you say experiencing yourself as a sexual being that means totally genital sex specifically. It just means experiencing yourself as a woman, as a total woman with whatever that means. It probably most shows in interactions with people. I think I come across as somebody that is warm and open, hospitable, a welcoming person. That's what a lot of people have said. Spiritual directees come in and they say, "Oh, I feel at home here." And I think that is something that is part of me as a sexual being. As a woman, I mean, whatever gift it is to be a woman is shown there.

All I can say is I enjoy peacefully and lovingly being with people, being part of their lives. There's no holding back inside of me. I can give myself to people totally. I can do that, and that to me says, you have recognized yourself as a woman and you're living out of it. That's what it says. I've never said that out loud. Thank you. I can give myself as much as I can, as much as is humanly possible within the boundaries of my commitment. I can do it. And it's a joy, it's a joy to do it.

When I deal with women and in myself, there are things that are said or read or experienced or done that resonate with my feminine friends and myself, that don't necessarily resonate with male friends. There are things that maybe seem to be more natural to women. I don't know if that's absolutely true or not, I just want to tell you what I experience. When I talk to women, their eyes light up at something. If I say the same thing to a man it wouldn't happen. And I think, well that's interesting, that's really interesting. But vice versa too. Men will catch something, and a woman might not catch that particular nuance. But there's something unique about us as a gender.

§

We're permeated. The spirit and body permeate each other. My body is not something . . . when it ends, the spirit begins kind of thing. No. No way, no way. I think my spirit is in my body. And maybe it only leaves my body when my body turns back to dust. But while I'm alive, to be alive, to me means to be an embodied spirit. That's what life means to me. So I can't separate it, maybe because I made such a sharp dichotomy before. It's just so evident that that was false, that we are permeated by spirit. It's in every cell, it's in every inch of my being. Just as God's spirit is permeating every inch of the universe, to the smallest, to the largest. There's a new cosmology too that goes along with all of this, where God is not up there, out there.

If God is permeating everything, then everything is spiritual. You can't, I can't say that I'm going to do a spiritual thing, and now I'm going to do a material thing. It doesn't make sense to me anymore. Everything I do is spiritual. Everything. What did Paul say? Whether you eat or drink. Yeah you, Paul, knew what you were talking about. You knew. You experienced. And you were trying to tell us that you can't make this divide. See, and I deal with a lot of people who say, "Well, I want to be spiritual." You are. You don't want to be, you are. "Yes, but how can I be more spiritual?" I don't know how you can be any more spiritual than you are. You are spiritual. Now if you're asking me how you can feed that spirit, deepen that sense of yourself as spirit, embodied spirit, then we have a place to work from. That we can go on. But don't ask me to give you some clues as to how to be spiritual, because you are.

§

I think about death because 76 years is a long time. When you look at the span, if I keep my health and all, it's not going to be too much longer, in comparison. So it's not

an unreal thing to me. It's very real. We just lost a young woman in the parish, died of cancer at 38 and left two kids. Those are the shocks of life. And it happens a lot. My question always about death is, why young people? And why middle aged people? Why children? I don't understand that. And I don't pretend to understand that. I think what death is, is a transition from one mode of being into another. So I'm going to be in another mode.

I've had several [after death] experiences with people, where I sensed the presence of the person. I didn't hear any words or anything like that, but I just sensed the message the person was giving me. It's a very powerful experience. One funny one was when I was driving, I was very nervous. I still am not the most peaceful person at the wheel, I'll tell you. I was really uptight this day and I was going down the middle lane, and my hands were like this on the wheel, and the cars were whizzing past me. My father had taught me to drive when I was a teenager, then I dropped it when I became a Sister, and then picked it up again as we were needed and were able. So I was going along, and I sensed my dad sitting there. I just sensed him right in the seat next to me. And he said, again not words, just a sense, *Honey you're doing fine*. And I visibly relaxed, I just visibly relaxed. I could just feel every piece of my body, hands on the wheel, everything, just relax. So to me it's an example of the closeness of people who have gone before us. They're really here. They're with us. They're in another, I'll use the word, dimension.

I probably would say that after death my spirit will go on, that there is that in me that will not die. But I will be missing something. Whereas before I probably would have looked at it as sloughing off something that I didn't need, now I would see it as missing something that was integral to my being. And so somehow, that lack has got to be made up for, and I don't know how that's going to be. But we talk about the resurrection of the

body in our tradition. And I believe that, but I don't know what that means. It doesn't obviously mean the cells that are all going to disintegrate into matter again are going to be reconstructed into the body I was. But whatever it means, I think right now I see that as a very important part. The body is not something I want to get rid of, but something that is integral to me that is precious. I'm very precious. It is the way I am, and who I am.

One of our liturgies says, Life is changed, not taken away. So it'll be something different. When I said, I'll miss my body, I will miss my body. And I think that'll be a good missing. I don't know what that means about the resurrection of the body, which is one of the dogmas we hold in our faith. It certainly doesn't mean the resurrection of these cells, because those cells change every, what is it, 6 years anyway. But I think it's one way of saying, That precious, beautiful body that you had is not gone. It might be changed, but it's not gone. That will be part of you too.

When I look at the mirror, I know my cells have changed drastically from years ago. I look in the mirror sometimes and say, Who's that old lady? It's you dear, it's you. You're an old woman now. Isn't that great? You're an old woman. And you know, life means something else when you're an older person. It's more precious maybe. There's a joy that wasn't there. Your body is precious. This body that's slowly disintegrating around you is still very precious. So I don't know what death is, to tell you the truth. But I think it's just that movement.

§

There's a lot more in this life that we're learning at this age of the world in terms of embodiment, in terms of the cosmos and creation. We're just on the edge. And what it's going to do, it seems to me, if we open ourselves to it, it's going to bring us more together as one. We're going to see what our traditions are and see them as valuable. We

grew up in them, with the good and the bad. If I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian. And that's my way. That's my way to God, and that's fine. But we're going to see that all the many ways are valuable and beautiful, and that why can't we see ourselves that way, and live with each other that way? It might have an impact down the road on world peace. I would hope it would. Because the main problem, it seems to me with all of us, is we don't see each other as we really are. If we did, we couldn't act toward each other the way we do in this world. So this unfolding of our own awareness and our own movement into new awareness may have, will have, tremendous repercussions.

Theresa

Theresa is a Caucasian, 54-year-old woman who is a religious Sister. She has been a Sister since the age of 18. As a prominent leader in the Catholic Church, Theresa travels extensively throughout the world. When she is in the United States, she lives in Santa Clara, California.

I think for me, my own journey just had to involve my body. Catholic Sisterhood in the mid-60s—one of my best friends went to the Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and I went to the convent—it literally was the time of the Haight. It was the Vietnam war. So here I go into the convent, with a conviction that I somehow experienced God wanting me to be a Sister. I didn't care about vows, I didn't know anything about that. I was the age of 18, with 25 other mostly 18-year-olds. Vatican II, the Catholic Church Council, had happened just four years prior to my coming to the convent. When I entered, all the Sisters who had until that point been in habits down to the floor, and big veils, a rosary, and a cross—that was all gone. I never wore that, and I was very happy. We were going to college, and it was all women. And I'd say the body was not emphasized.

Then I'm here in a situation with all women. This wasn't common by any means, but it happened to more people than myself—one night a woman came into my room. We all had small, private rooms. She came into my room, and I remember experiencing just sexual excitement. Which for me was probably, at age 19, the first time I even experienced that in my body. So I allowed myself to continue to explore that, not with the other individual, but just through masturbation, and not obsessively. I remember talking about it with my director, we were obligated to see them. I talked about it with two different ones, and both were fine women. But they didn't know how to talk about it. The

whole area of being an embodied woman seeking to make the vow of celibacy, the help or the conversation I wanted, didn't find a home. It was spiritualized.

As the years went on, I became a high school teacher. But the high schools that our Sisters taught in were all girls high schools. I remember very distinctly thinking, if I continue to teach high school, I will primarily meet women. And I value the friendship of women very much—I have very dear women friends—but in my 20s, I wanted to have more connection with men. So three of us requested to live an experiment of living in the poorest parish in Santa Clara County. That for me was a wonderful time, connecting the rich and the poor. The people among whom we lived were very poor. It was only a two bedroom house.

The Sister whom I shared a room with over the first year, would have nightmares. She'd wake me up in the middle of the night—wonderful, wonderful woman—and she'd say, “Will you pray with me on this? I'm having terrible nightmares?” So we'd pray together. I said, “You know, my mother always used holy water at night.” So we'd get holy water, use it very reverently. We really fell back on traditional Catholic stuff. I had this intuition, and I said, “You know, I think you should go talk to this priest.” I just knew a little bit about him. I said, “I hear he's great at dreams.” In a way it was for her the whole opening of her identity as a lesbian woman. Then she promptly fell in love with me. I myself was very happy to be in a parish, because I was very happy to be getting to know men. Needless to say, there were some real fights. Struggles. In the second year, the third Sister had moved. So it was just the two of us, all the more reason that we could have done anything we wanted. And I didn't want to. Oh, we'd have these fights.

I think at that time the way I talked to her was, it was my commitment to Jesus, was what I said. In retrospect—happily, she really challenged me. “Your relationship to

Jesus is an embodied relationship,” she would say. Even then I couldn’t. I’m not a fighter, and neither is she. We’re both very fine women. But we had had a terrible fight one day, and she went off to work. I worked in the parish at that point, so I remember sitting down and just praying, saying, “What do I do?” And I thought, I have to ask her to show me what she means. When she came home, I said, “I need to have you show me what it means to love me.” So there was some physical demonstration of that. She eventually, again after many years, left our community to be in a lesbian relationship. I said to her, “I do not think that’s my core.” I think she, out of maybe her own need, and maybe some sense of me, felt it was. But I don’t think it was.

The following year I was asked to choose where I wanted to study. It would be preparation to work with the women who entered our community. I chose a program in New York. I was away for just about twelve months straight. I was probably 35 when I went into the program. It turned my life around, inside out, a very freeing experience, and very spiritual. But for me it involved falling madly in love with a priest. And it became physical. The physicality of it, the very first time I was just held, I remember going to my own apartment that night, and I had a very clear sense that this was about liberation in God. Not just me, but God.

My persistence in staying in the relationship came out of that experience of, *This is about liberation. And it’s about God. And me.* But I would have been too uptight, too shy to pursue that. I don’t know what I would have done if I had not gone to my room and had such a clear sense that this was all right. And that’s all it was. I can picture my room, I can picture my bookcase there, closing the door, and just knowing, *This is good. This is all right. And it’s about my own liberation in God.* Those were the words.

To be a Sister, to be a vowed celibate, that generally never sat right with me. I really value a spiritual guide, so I always have had a spiritual guide in my life. When I returned home, I was talking to another Sister, and I remember just struggling, saying, “I have to leave because I broke my vows.” And I remember her saying to me one day, “Do you really want to stay?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Well, what would you like to do?” I said, “I think I should go tell the leader of the community what I’ve done.” She said, “Why are you going to do that? Her number one hang-up is sex. If you tell her, of course she’ll say you have to leave.” I think she was challenging my own inner authority. So I never did, and I’ve never left. And I am forever grateful that I have loved and have been loved.

§

I find if I slow down enough, because I can be a very active person, if I slow down the biggest hints to me about what’s going on, shows up in my body. I’ve been in national leadership, I’ve done quite a bit internationally, so I travel a lot. I don’t get physically ill often at all, but I have valued massage, acupuncture, just as ways to stay tuned in. Because I feel like my body does lead me to my soul. My body does tell me who I truly am. To pray with no clothes on, when that seems appropriate for me, I do that. Or movement.

I had been in other national positions as religious leader, and I honor the leadership role. But I felt I had not been worthy of what the call is. I think I would not be as harsh on myself today. Because I think my life, my body, who I am is given to God, and to this community. I’m very human, and I’m glad. All of it has made me who I am, and I love that. I love who I am, and I’m sorry for the shame I have dealt myself. But all those things happen for a purpose. I think for me the route of needing to explore who I

am physically, alone and in relationship with others, has been essential to my spiritual journey. And I would never stay with the appearance of being celibate, and have a life-long partner on the side. I think that's done in certain circumstances. For me, that would be dishonest. So, this is it.

§

I like to think of myself as a very progressive woman, religious, who is Catholic. For several years, I had a national position that brought me very close to the Bishops. I had to interact with Catholic Bishops and even had to spend a month in Rome. What all of that did for me—I think I was overwhelmed that I was so closely involved with the hierarchy of the Church. I absolutely shut down physically. It was as if I had no body. It was as if every relationship was arm's length. I think many leaders and teachers in the Catholic Church do very little to promote healthy mind-body-spirit integration. I think it's sad.

In shutting down, I think—and again, traveling a lot—I would say I misused food, and I misused alcohol. Nothing to a terrible degree. I would say it was a mindlessness. I was not mindful of all of who I am, and I think the food or drink would help me be less mindful. It wasn't even a struggle, as much as it was a way to just be mindless. Unconscious. Fortunately I have friends who don't let me get away with that kind of thing.

All of it tends to stabilize me more, ground me more, center me more, in what my real choices are. I say of myself, and sometimes others say it of me, “I need to go to those edges to know who I am.” A lot of women in my lifestyle maybe would never go to those edges. But I know more clearly who I am by going. I'm sure there would be a whole crowd saying I'm a terrible Sister for what I've done. And there would be a whole crowd

saying, “That’s the way it is.” I think of Thomas Merton. When I read his diaries and know his story, I know my journey is not an unusual journey. I think, as much as I have explored my own self, my own journey, my own spirit, I’ve also been healed physically. It’s through the physical interaction, whether talk, or being held, or maybe being forgiven.

My relationship to God, I would say, is enhanced by all of that. The times I have let down my professional, kind of stay-in-my-head approach, and just been softer and more vulnerable—even just plain old body conscious—there’s much more room for God in me. Where the other way has got such a hardness to it. And that’s not me.

I certainly love my body more than I ever have. I love me. I don’t even like saying, “I love my body,” as if it’s over there and here I am. But I do love my self. I think I have a ways to go in that. Again, when I’m kind of my truer self, that’s where I am. But the easiest way for me to lose touch with even *the holy*, is to lose touch with my body. I don’t say I’m even conscious of that. I need to catch myself in that.

I love doing body work. These last two years, probably for a good year I did it quite regularly, with a woman whom I believe is really a healer. Though I was doing good inner work, I needed to ground it in my body. I needed to do body work. Before I did the body work, I needed to do something with my hands, so I did clay work. The clay work kind of led to the body work.

§

Sometimes I just pray, putting my hands over my uterus, and just pray that the life energy be with me. In many ways, I feel like I situate who I am in my body. This sounds funny, but you’ve probably heard it. When people will say to me, “I love you Theresa.” You know, it’s so funny, I think, it’s not a vague *you* that they love. They love *Theresa*.

And who is that? And I say, “Well how do they experience me?” I’m embodied, so that’s part of it. But I know there’s a spirit in me that’s life-giving and attractive to others. You know? That’s me. And it’s very awesome for me. I’m very shy to talk about it because it’s still new in many ways.

Once when I must have been talking about maybe some of the sexual experience, or physical, and I must have said, “I have thought I’m a bad person for my non-celibate moments.” I remember the other person leaning forward like this and saying, “Theresa, can’t you believe you are a child of God?” I think the leaning forward, and just holding the hands like that—I mean, there are these signature moments that I will carry, and that’s one of them. It’s like, for people to say, “I love you Theresa,” well, this is who I am. Dare I even say, “I’m a child of God? The Holy One is in me?” I need to just stay with that more often. More than I do. Because I just dismiss it. It’s like God breaks through in the simplest of ways. In me, in you.

§

My father died several years ago. Nobody was in the room when he died. When I was going to New York he had suffered several strokes. So I said, “Now Dad, do you have any sense that you might die in the next 12 months?” My father was this very earthy man. He was quiet for a little bit, then he said, “Hell no. Besides Theresa, you could be right next to me, or you could be in New York. I still have to die alone.” And he did. My mother had stepped out for a walk, and he died.

Then I did chaplaincy training; it was the first time I saw somebody actually die. It was a 4-year-old girl. But you know, I really had a sense that the body is a container or a shell. Because when that spirit’s gone, it’s just very different.

I don't think about my own death a lot. I'm going abroad for several years, so I was asked, should I die, would I want my body brought back? And I said, "Not my body, but my ashes." That seems good—good use of my body, good use of space.

I've had many experiences of spirit lives. A dear woman who was quite significant in our community and in my life—and she's still with me—about a year ago, I had a very clear experience of her. She said to me she was taking leave from kind of shepherding me as closely as she had, because I was on the path that no longer needed her assistance. I cried. I mean it was very real to me, even though there were no voices or anything. It was very real. So, I'm not afraid of death. I do want to be more careful about my body, so that the container that I am can last a long time. I watch my mother who is in her 80s and quite crippled, and it seems I have genes more like her than my father. I find myself very conscious that now is the time to be more caring of this body that I am, so that I steward my spirit well.

And I think, to think about a book, or a dissertation that allows our bodies to be the very message of who we really are, which is so much more than skin and bones, I think it's wonderful. But I wonder if each one of us, in our own journeys, have to come to grip with spirituality, sexuality, bodyliness. If that isn't the path, those are the ingredients for the path, and death more of a doorway. My experience is, it doesn't end.

§

It's so easy to get stereotypical, but I wonder if women, at least the women I know, including myself, seem to treasure bodyliness as a conveyor of truth. Beauty, you know, in the deepest spiritual sense. Not all women do. Sometimes I feel like men make use of the body more. It's a function. Maybe sometimes more like a container. Happily, I feel like I know some tender men who I don't think would fall to that. Ones who have

allowed themselves to be formed and taught, more by women, I think. The men I'm thinking of would be heterosexual men. I think women have been significant shapers of their spirituality. And gay men too. I've had the opportunity to be a spiritual director and teacher for men studying to be priests, many of whom are gay. Even that part of their journey—I don't know if *essential* is too strong of a word—but it seems essential to them that a woman be a part of that. Even though their own fulfillment sexually would be with a person of the same sex.

I'm very grateful, I say it so many times, that I have been loved well. The most significant relationship certainly is the one that began in New York. But for the most part, I have been loved by people who are capable of loving another, more than just themselves. And I am forever grateful.

Claire

Claire is a 46-year-old Caucasian woman who is a mother of four, a writer, and psychotherapist. She was raised Roman Catholic. Claire lives in San Francisco, California.

I grew up Roman Catholic, and cannot talk about body without that as my context because I grew up in a church, pre-Vatican II. It was a world that was imbued with spirit. The other realm was as real as this tangible realm. My mom used to tell me, if I would go to bed and pray the rosary just before sleeping, and if I should fall asleep, the angels would finish it for me. And I absolutely believed that. The realm of the angels was as real to me as flesh and blood. I went to Catholic school, and every day on all our papers we would write J-M-J at the top of each paper, which is Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. We were asking for a blessing on the paper, on our work that we were doing. We would start with morning offerings; we would go to confession every two weeks; we would process over as children to the church. The ritual, the candles, and the incense—sensory experiences were just a very important part of my life. They're in my cellular level. It's that early, early conditioning.

During Lent, we'd walk in and the crucifix would be covered in a purple cloth, and all the statues would be covered in purple cloths for the entire time of Lent. We would do Stations of the Cross. For me, Mary was very important. She was flesh and blood, and the agony of losing her son I felt, as a little tiny girl. So the stations—even though it was about Jesus' death—for me, was really about Mary's experience losing a son. And so within the Catholic context, Mary really was goddess. We would pray to Mary because she had the inside track to talk to Jesus, who could get things done. During May, we would process and crown Mary with flowers. I would go and pick flowers from

my garden and weave them together with wire and make these crowns, and then we would have these processions. Now, with hindsight, they were the goddess; they were the fertility; they were all of that. So it was a real gift to me, and it was so important in setting that foundation of the feminine, the divine feminine. I didn't know it at the time; I would never have called Mary God or Goddess, but that's how she functioned. She would always be included in all the prayers.

The Catholic Church was so sacramental in terms of things, the divine always came through things—bread, and wine, and water. So those are tangible things, and the blessings that are on our bodies, that part feels incarnational to me. It's not just talking to the head. It's including the senses. And Jesus, in looking at what he did, you know he went around touching people. He went around laying hands, and Judaism is a physical religion. His own religion being Jewish. It was about God in history. It's not a God removed. God moves through people, events. It's not separate. So I think I take on that because he's been a teacher of the tradition. And I think of resurrection too, whether it literally happened or not is kind of beside the point. Resurrection is the notion of life and body being reunited and continuing on. It's not that the spirit floated away disembodied, but actually came back and could be seen and touched. And Jesus said, "Put your fingers in my hands, in my wounds," after he had risen and appeared. He said, "Put your hand in my side." Again, if you look at it from a symbolic perspective, in terms of what that says about matter, it's that the Christ didn't disappear up into the heavens. He came back and broke bread and fed his disciples fish on the beach—concrete.

At the same time, part of the Catholic tradition was a real denial of the body. Interesting juxtaposition, that there's so many sensory things to it, and yet, the real thing that's important is heaven. It's what comes after, and the real holy people are the ones

who forsake the body, in terms of the priests and the nuns. And if you really want to please God, you will listen for that vocation, and I did. So very early on, I wanted so much to please God that I thought, this is the way to do it, to forsake the body. So I never wanted to be a mom, growing up. My life now, as I see it—and there's a lot of in between, between early on and now—is getting that notion of priest or priestess is not about something disconnected from life, but it's the heart of life, and it's mediating love. That's the role of priest and priestess, it is to mediate between the realms. For me, as a mom, it is mediating love to my own little congregation, or to the people in my life. It is really being open to spirit, to allow that to come through. The ritual and everything is wonderful, but at the heart of it is love, and to really transmit that is transmitting spirit.

§

When I was a teenager, my mother actually is the one who began to take a look at the charismatic movement that was happening within the Catholic Church. I would occasionally go to some prayer meetings with her, and was very amazed by a lot of what I saw when people were speaking in tongues. In one sense, it wasn't that surprising to me because the realm of the divine was so real to me. Of course, God could talk through our own mouths. I remember I used to come home and pray for spirit to come in that very personal way, that seemed to be even more real.

When I was a senior my mom heard that there was a Catholic priest that was a healer that was speaking at an Assembly of God Church. Since there was a Catholic priest at the Assembly of God, it was okay to go. She wanted me to go, and I did not want to go. She literally dragged me, kind of kicking and screaming. I'd never been in a non-Catholic Church, and I just didn't know what I was going to find. I was very shy. It was like too new and I just didn't want to go. I was a good girl. So I went into this church, just

gritting my teeth. I was so mad at her. I just felt like, “We’re going to sit in the back row!” Of course, we get there and it’s an Assembly of God Church and they have greeters. They ushered us to the front row. I was horrified. I was swearing under my breath at my mom, “How’d you get us into this? I have no idea what’s going to go on.” I was really uncomfortable. Then the service started, and they started praying in tongues and singing in tongues. The minister came over and started praying over me. He just laid his hands on my shoulder and said, “Just close your eyes and say, Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus.” I closed my eyes and said, “Thank you Jesus.” I just wanted to crawl out of my skin. I wanted to get out of there so bad. Then something happened.

It was one of the most amazing spiritual experiences of my life, one of those kind of fireworks type moments. Suddenly, the entire place disappeared. The minister disappeared and I didn’t hear anything else. It was an experience of light, love, of absolute unity. I was just caught up into something that I had never experienced before, and it was phenomenal. I never wanted to open my eyes. At that moment, I wasn’t really conscious of my embodied self. It was just union with everything. Of course, we don’t stay at that place, we do come back into our bodies. When I came back, or became conscious again, of body, I was speaking in tongues, and I didn’t care.

If there was something I had been saved from, it was loneliness. It was the hole that I carried inside. The years of high school were very, very painful for me. I was a real introvert, and going to seven high schools was pretty much a nightmare for an introverted girl. You don’t want to be seen as being alone and not having any friends. I don’t even know that I knew how sad that was at the time. But what happened after this experience was that I never felt, and I haven’t to this day, that kind of utter loneliness. It was a sense of a foundation that cannot be taken away, an intimacy with the divine, with spirit. I’m

never alone. The song on the radio as we drove home that night was, *I can see clearly now, the rain has gone, and all of the bad feelings have disappeared*. It was like God had put this song on the radio.

§

When I was nineteen my favorite book was *The Cloud of Unknowing*. At that time our house had a second story, and there was a wooden awning overhang that was over the entire patio. I don't even know how strong it was. What I would do every morning before sunrise is climb out the window wrapped in a blanket. With the psalms, I would sit and pray for an hour, greet the sun, and meditate using primarily the psalms. Usually the prayers would be one line. It's like a mantra, and it's physical. I feel it in my body. I feel it, like in my prayer, when I was reading and praying with *The Cloud of Unknowing* or John of the Cross. It's a tangible sense of spirit that I get. I feel the energy in my body.

For example: *Like a deer longs for running water, so I long for you*. It just filled me, that sense of being in touch with longing. I couldn't go beyond that line. I couldn't even read beyond that. Even as I say it, I can feel it: *Like a deer longs for running water, so I long for you*. It's pressure in my chest. It's a fullness, where I feel like it'll explode, or expand. It's this physical pressure, and I primarily feel it here [Claire points to her heart area]. With some of the deep contemplation, like *The Cloud of Unknowing* talks about, I feel it even all over. It's an energy, and it's a sense of losing boundaries, losing a sense of where I end and where everything begins. I'm aware that there's an observer self kind of watching this. And I move back and forth, in and out of that observer self, to just totally being with the experience, and then kind of observing, "Wow, you're having an experience." So it kind of goes back and forth.

Another mantra from John of the Cross: *Oh living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest center.* That was another mantra for many prayer times. And his poems are very erotic, and are from his feminine soul to the masculine divine; it's this dance that they do. There is some of that too, even with my journey. There's an intimacy that I experience. I see spirit as feminine in some ways, or generic. Maybe it's my soul, you know, that feels feminine and because I'm heterosexual, I have this intimacy that sometimes feels that masculine-feminine, just being in that interplay.

§

So I didn't become a nun. I was married, and I got pregnant. I was in seminary at the time, which was a real experience too. In terms of embodiment, pregnancy was an amazing spiritual experience for me. In many ways, there was a dislike of my body just because it didn't fit into this spiritual, priest-nun scenario. Also, as an Irish Catholic, those centuries of my ancestors also came into my experience. I did not know my own body, in terms of a clitoris, or where the urethra was. I didn't even know what the names were, what they were for, and I got married not knowing. But the pregnancy, suddenly carrying life, was amazing. That my body knew what to do, it knew how to grow a human being! I remember praying while pregnant. I would be sitting and wanting to meditate on something profound. I would go inside, and then the baby would kick me, or he'd roll around, or get the hiccups. And I just would stop and then I said, "I'm getting distracted from my prayer. I need to go back to my prayer." And then, "Oh he's rolling, he's really active." And finally I got it, that this was my prayer. I would pray sometimes, the "Our Father," and what happened was, as I was praying it, I realized it was my prayer with my son, it was our prayer. So suddenly these two beings in one were saying the

prayer. It was probably my first tangible experience of embodiment. And every time I was pregnant, it was a profound experience.

I was in seminary for four years. During that time I was pregnant twice, and gave birth just after I graduated to my second child. When I started I was only one of two women. I remember there was a class being offered in sacraments, which was basically how to say Mass, and how to do baptisms, and all these things that were required for the male baby priests. And so I didn't have to take it. I would have liked to take it, but because I was nine months pregnant, I didn't know that I'd fit into their garments. It's odd, one is called a sacrament and one is not, officially. Yet my experience was, of birth, that this was sacrament. The official definition of sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. For me, giving birth was truly sacramental.

§

I also got in touch with some of my anger at the institution for denying what felt like a vocation to me. I wanted to be able to create ritual, and work with people, and be a priest. We didn't use the word priestess at that point. And so I got in touch with some of my anger, and I could no longer go to church. The language was too difficult for me. The masculine pronouns would just pour over me, and when you're doing ritual, you're very sensitive to words. And when they're all masculine, they wash over us and they affect us. What happened was, they were not validating my body, who I was. It was merely the result that I didn't have a penis that I was separated from my seminarian classmates, and the theology behind it is so bad. It's so bad. It's that in the official documents, Jesus is, was, and remains a man. You know, wait a minute, the Christ is beyond gender. Jesus the man, yeah, he's male. But you're not even looking at how he lived, in terms of the radical way he chose women as his inner circle, Mary Magdalene, and all that. You're not even

paying attention to that. But given that, the Christ is neither masculine or feminine. Even St. Paul said, "In Christ there is no male or female." That was what it was like during these difficult years, getting in touch with the feminine divine and loving her fiercely, and identifying. What if I didn't see God as just male? What if I saw God as female? Knowing that there's no gender, but all of a sudden, my whole body relaxed. It was this acceptance. It wasn't like I had to do anything to be spiritual. When I played with the notion of God as feminine, it was like absolute acceptance, just how I am, not any more doing of anything. And that was really healing.

I also had a very powerful prayer experience where I was meditating, doing a prayer of the imagination. It's actually Ignatian, where you use sensory detail and you picture yourself in this scene as vividly as possible, to have an experience. That's how the Ignatian prayer is. So I was doing that, and it was on the passage where Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb at like 4:30 in the morning, after Jesus has been buried. So I did that prayer, as Mary Magdalene, just being in that place, seeing the world. When you do this imaginative prayer it is real, when you really incorporate a lot of sensory detail. As her, of course I would want to be with the one I loved, to anoint his body, to go and touch the body. This is my teacher. This is the person who has opened the world to me. And to have watched the murder and all that, to want to go before anybody else, to have that alone time. So it was like four in the morning, as soon as possible, not sleeping the night before, just getting out to go to the tomb. And while there—it was the passage from John. While there, the boulder is moved, and there's a man in the garden. She sees him in the garden, and he asks her, "Whom are you seeking?" And she says, "My Lord." And he turns and looks at her and says, "Mary." My experience of this was, Mary was the answer. She said, "Where have you placed him?" And he turns and says, "Mary." What

happened in that moment, for me, was an experience of resurrection, because Mary was the answer to the question, "Where have you laid him? Where have you placed him?" What happened was, Claire is where the risen Christ energy is. It's no longer isolated in one teacher. It is released, and it is in Mary, Claire. What happened, again physically, was like this explosion of light, of unity. And from that moment on, I have not been separate. It's like when St. Paul says, "No longer I, but Christ lives in me." How does it actually function for me? Sometimes as I'm talking, it's kind of an external part, but the Christ energy, the Christ consciousness is no longer separate from who I am.

§

Being seen on the altar, to have a woman on the altar, is a violation of some taboos that are way old, way deep. This is huge. Except for one liturgy that I did in a small group, it's been my husband and I. And people still, because he's an ordained priest, it counts as the real Mass. I haven't yet done one all by myself, with the large congregation. It's to come. Although, you know what, the other piece of that is that I don't think women do ritual alone like that. To stand up there by myself, yes, there's that making a statement. But first of all, the structure is not an organic one, in terms of how I would do liturgy normally. I would want a circle. I don't want different clergy and non-clergy, or any of that. So I'm working in this system. I'm taking baby steps myself, and helping people take them. It is not how I, like with other women, how I do ritual, or how I would choose to. But you can't get from here to there in one fell swoop. So it's moving myself and other people step by step, along the journey. I've had women come up with tears in their eyes saying, "I never thought before I died, that I'd see a woman on the altar." And so, the impact at both the conscious and unconscious level is profound.

§

My natural tendency is to go small, to pretend I'm invisible. I would do that a lot during high school. I would walk around and just pretend I was invisible. I would wear baggy clothes, so nobody could actually see my body. My mom would tell me, again as an Irish Catholic, "Cover your headlights," which are our breasts, "Cover your crack, wear baggy, loose clothes, don't show your body." It's real easy for me to live from here up (motioning to her head). When I'm writing, I stop exercising, and that's not a good thing. I think I can live from here up, and then my body starts falling apart and saying, "Un-uh, pay attention." I'm in that process of getting even more just how exercise, for example, is not separate from prayer.

I went to a writers' conference and there was this seminar that was about speaking from the heart. Speaking Circles is what it's called. I walked late into this room, and it was full of all of these people, writers, and agents. And the facilitator stops the class and says, "Welcome, what's your name?" I say, "Claire." Shrink! He says, "Welcome, Claire." His presence was just communicating something that was so accepting. He invited people to come up. They were being videotaped, and without a script, just invited to come up and stand up, and receive the love that was being communicated from people's eyes. And just to notice whatever it is that comes up that you want to talk about. Well, I found myself going up. I stood up there and I said, "I have breasts." In this room of these strangers. I have spent my life kind of covering up, you know, and hunching my shoulders, trying not to look so tall. But to stand there and say, "I have breasts," I would say that was a real spiritual experience.

I think my growing edge is in this area, is in terms of really getting that I have a body, because it's very easy for me to forget. What I think I wrestle with is so much at

the cultural, social level. The weight issue, from the time I was a teenager, reading those teen magazines. Weight and beauty standards are something that have been part of my journey. And still, God, I read an interview with Oprah, you know, “What are you most proud of?” And she says, “Losing forty pounds.” And I heard Madeline Albright interviewed on NPR the other day, and she kept putting herself down in terms of her weight. I do the same thing.

I was asked, “Is God in sex?” As I was thinking about the question, I said, “You know, what this question really is, is about self-acceptance. Is God in your own body? Because if you get that it’s not a question of because you remember God that God is present. If you accept your own body, if you get that you are the Christ, then whatever you’re doing, whether it’s eating or drinking or making love, you are not separated from that.”

I come back to that resurrection experience. If you get that: Where is Christ consciousness? Where is Buddha nature? Where is the divine? Claire. Then you don’t have that separation, where this is okay and that’s not okay. That’s the kind of the fullness that I’m hoping to move even more into.

§

My experience of pregnancy and birth and about life, even if you don’t actually give birth, [is that] our biology just feels more ancient than men. What a gift it is to be female, that being mother earth, the goddess. It’s a wonderful energy. And what society has done to denigrate that. Even as I’m talking, I can feel how powerful an energy it is. And when I get into that place of, “Oh, I’ve gained ten pounds.” It’s such a shallow place. It’s like Oprah. These powerful women, and their greatest accomplishment is losing weight. It’s like, “Wait, wait, wait, you’re not in touch with something!”

For this last book, my animal totem was the elephant, which is mobilizing the matriarchs, because it's the matriarch in the elephant herd that leads the herd to safety. It's the grandmothers and the mothers. That energy, if we don't do it, it's not going to happen. Because the men don't have that same cellular attachment to life. It's just different. It's good, it propels us forward in a lot of ways. But there's another energy that's needed right now. You know there was a time when God was all male, then the time when God was more female. Now it's a time where it's beyond male-female, I mean, masculine-feminine. It's more mixed up, in a good way, the mixing of the energies. So I don't feel like I want to just focus on women, because I think we won't get to where we need to be if we don't also include the masculine. As I move into the menopausal years, what's happening at a chemical level is my body's producing androgen. And what does that mean? How's that going to show up? And how's that going to influence me? It's such an interesting question, because it's like, who am I? Claire, and then Claire with androgens. It's just being in the experience of the moment, and really showing up and being present to what's happening now with who I am. I realize staying in the present, versus moving into the past or the future, is my way out of fear. And it's just a good healthy way to live.

Yeshe

Yeshe is a 49-year-old Caucasian woman who is a Tibetan Buddhist Lama (spiritual teacher). She is the mother of two, and a psychotherapist. She works with a community of students in Berkeley, California, where she also lives.

I experience the body as a direct feedback situation. I see it as a real information source. Since I was a teenager, I've always tried to integrate psychologically, physically, and spiritually. I consciously started working on those things from when I was about fifteen—with dance, yoga, spiritual practice, and psychological investigation. I believe that in spiritual development there's actually a transformation that happens in the body, in terms of the whole cellular structure; and in the subtle body, the whole system of subtle channels and chakras. I don't think that's necessarily a fixed system. I do think that there are subtle energy bodies, and also the energy moves through the body in particular ways due to a variety of factors. There's a direct correlation between karmic or psychological material and the way it plays out in the body, and the way that the energy flows, where it blocks up. I've always been acutely aware of my body in some sense or another, and working with that. I've gone through very powerful transformation both in my body and of my body.

§

In Tibetan retreat you do a lot of intensive yogic practice, both physically and in meditation, and combined, with pranayama breathing. When I was in 3-year retreat, as we got into the intensive yogic practices, I noticed, as I purified my mental aspect, then the emotional aspect, the body was the last to shift. And in some sense it was the hardest to shift, maybe because it's the most dense. It's always seemed to take a whole lot longer

and involve more pain, at least for me personally, for the physical to actually shift and transform.

Sometimes what arises is certain kinds of pains. I mean a lot of people notice this in meditation retreats, and when you're in a 3-year retreat, it can become intense physical discomfort, at certain points. We look at it as unwholesome habitual patterns being flushed out to the surface. It's usually never a serious health crisis. It's not really like you're sick, it's more like the energies are being released. But as they release, it can often be very uncomfortable.

When I finished the 3-year retreat, I really felt like I had been reborn. My body felt like I was 3 years old again. I could run like I was 3 years old again. Literally, my body felt—now I didn't notice any of this until I was out of the retreat—my body felt very, very different than it had, much lighter. It actually felt glowing.

When experience and realization of emptiness really started to open up, I experienced, which I think is pretty par for the course, the actual experience and realization of emptiness which has to integrate physically. There's stages to that. The integration of emptiness into the body is actually a whole process. It's hard to kind of remember and put it in perspective, when you've been doing intense spiritual practice a long time. I realize that it's been like that for me for so long, that I don't even think about it, that is: thinking of my body *as* light, experiencing it as light and space, rather than as a dense kind of form. And experiencing it as not stopping at the skin, or the outside of the body. Not having any separation from anything. So I don't actually experience a physical separation between what is my body, and what isn't my body. It doesn't mean I can't differentiate between say, your energy field or my energy field, or something like that. But I don't actually experience the separation.

I do experience my sense of 'I' in reference to being located in a body. Although I know that's not true, and I experience that it's not true also. But in the habitual relative sense, I experience it like that.

I also had a kundalini experience that happened that was very powerful physically, a very powerful experience of bliss in the body. And you know, all these things bring up their own psychological issues, so that's a whole topic. That's really interesting, the combination between the spiritual, what's opening up or happening, what's happening on a body level, and then what the psyche does with that, or what the ego does with that.

§

I also noticed in 3-year retreat, and I think especially for women this is more common, there becomes a very heightened sensitivity to what you take into the body, in terms of eating. For myself, in general, I've always been pretty sensitive to what I eat, and continue to be that way. I don't have allergies, but I have to be pretty careful. I can eat a lot of things, but they're things that I know agree with me. So like junk food, it's not just bad for me, it really makes me sick. Especially because now, I haven't really eaten junk food in so long. I think a heightened sensitivity to what goes in is often pretty common. We found in our 3-year retreat, the women were much more sensitive to that than the men, in terms of diet.

§

I think that until there's quite profound levels of realization, that are actually integrated and stabilized, one can go into certain situations and get pains in one's body from the energy in the room. I've been in some pretty horrendous situations in that way, especially in large groups. Like if I'm meditating or something, if I'm not teaching, but

I'm just participating. There might be a large group of people, and I will start feeling everybody's pain. The first time I ever had a really bad headache happened in that situation. That's a sensitivity on the level of the body, which brings up a whole question about boundaries. The whole thing about boundaries, I think, changes a lot when you *are* really integrating the non-separation, and the realization of emptiness, and interdependence.

My body gives me information about people, when I teach meditation or meet with people individually, I will pick up what's going on. I won't get pain or sick, but I will know where peoples' mind states are by the information my body is giving me. I use that in my teaching, because I can tell when there's anxiety in the room, or all kinds of different things. I can tell when people aren't grounded in their lower charkas, when the heart chakra is closed, or when people don't have enough loving kindness. I can feel all that in my body. That's how I get a lot of information, plus information about myself. If I'm off, or if I'm really not getting something that's going on, I will feel it in my body and I won't know what it is, but I'll have to take the time to figure it out.

One of the painful parts of it is experiencing peoples' negative projections, physically. I will get physically sick if people have a lot of negative transference toward me, which has happened very rarely, but is unpleasant and takes spiritual, emotional, and physical work to clear it.

I think it's hard, the whole body thing is hard. At least for me, and I think for a lot of us, it's a semi-reluctant embodiment. It's like understanding that it has to happen, but there's also kind of a reluctance about it, because it's hard work and it's painful. It can also be very blissful, but there's a lot of stuff to work through that isn't very blissful.

§

I don't think I'm a highly sexual person. I don't really think I ever have been. I think I'm kind of normal, not outside normal, but I don't experience myself as having a real strong sex drive. But I have always had men around me. I am heterosexual, and I've always had, especially if I'm single, a lot of male energy. I seem to have some sort of magnetism for men. That was very hard for me when I was young, because I had a very highly developed Bodhisattva kind of consciousness about benefiting people. I had a lot of conflict around magnetizing people and wanting to benefit them, and not knowing how to do that, feeling like I had to make love with them because they were there and they needed love. My sexuality has always been, not always been I should say, but often has had this component of compassion mixed with it. Again, it is sort of a tricky process, to sort all that through. I would say for me, the real pull for sexuality is not so much physical, as emotional. The closeness of sexual intimacy, the pull for that is much more based in emotional intimacy, of really wanting emotional intimacy rather than the actual sexuality. Although the sexual part has been fine and good and everything, but I'm not that highly motivated towards it.

I *have* had incredibly profound experiences spiritually sexually, even from when I was very young, like eighteen, even maybe earlier. I remember a lot of experiences around the age of about eighteen, very profound experiences, spiritually, during making love. A profound opening to love, to all beings. Profoundly experiencing a love for all beings, wanting to love all beings, even the ones that I was averse to. Really it's a lot of Bodhisattva kind of stuff, that's what I mean. It's been very mixed in my sexuality since I was a teenager.

In Tibetan tantra practice, we work with bringing in the sexual energy and transforming it. I think, kind of the bottom line for me now, is that it really comes down to energy. If it doesn't feel right to me energetically, then I wouldn't feel comfortable being sexual. One thing that changed after 3-year retreat for me was, I think I felt much more able and willing to just be in my own truth, in what was going on. Although I still worked on that all along, because again, compassion arising has been kind of tricky to work with skillfully at certain points. It is an interesting dance, one that requires distinguishing between true compassion and co-dependence.

§

I got involved in Tibetan Buddhism when I was 25. Before, I was studying comparative mysticism. I was studying Sufism, mystic Christianity, Yoga, Zen, and different things. I spent my college years studying comparative mysticism. I was raised Episcopalian, so I actually started having mystical experiences, that were in my body, even as a little girl in church. I would have things that I would feel physically. I guess you would call them kind of experiences of the divine, in church. Especially, I think, because I sang in the choir for many years. We did a lot of Gregorian and other kinds of chanting, and I have a devotional nature. I think if you have a devotional nature and you do devotional singing, it actually does something with your body and mind that opens you up to actually having experiences of what we could call the sacred or divine.

§

One thing happened when I was 3 when I was with my grandmother. She used to have this beautiful large garden in Sonoma. We were out in this area, and she and I were really close, and she started talking to me. We were talking about going to China, and something triggered me, and I actually completely lost consciousness of the normal outer

world. I had an experience of my body moving through light blue space, moving through the earth, and the earth was like a white round sphere. I was moving through seven different white spheres of the earth, and it was all made of light. And my body, it was more like my consciousness, and my body consciousness was moving directly up through all these spheres of light. I lost ordinary consciousness completely. I remember my grandma said, "Are you okay?" I never told anybody about any of these things until the last 10, 15 years, when I've talked about some of these experiences. But as a child, I never talked about any of it. I just somehow felt it wasn't appropriate to talk about.

And then in church while taking communion, I used to experience taking Holy Communion as the Holy spirit entering me through the Communion.

§

I was only 30 when I went into 3-year retreat, but I felt like my body was sort of starting to become solidified in a certain sense. And after retreat all that was gone, and never came back. There's a kind of fluidity about my experience in my body. It almost kind of felt like it was stiffening or solidifying, sort of like hardening of the arteries. Although I don't think that was happening in actual physical fact. In terms of the cellular change, it has a lot to do with the experience of light in the body. I used to have as a teenager and in my 20s, the feeling of a lot of darkness in my body. Doing a lot of purification practices with prayer, light, and mantra, I started to open up into a lot of light just manifesting in the body. Or other kinds of things, experiences like seeing jewels in the body, that kind of thing.

§

A couple of years ago when I went to see the Dalai Lama for a major initiation, I woke up one morning very early, it was like 5:00 in the morning. I had a dream.

Somehow in the dream, he had given me transmission. There was this energy, and it was actually physically happening right here, and it was like pure light, an exploding star. It was so powerful, it was unbelievable. That was hard for my ego, my psyche, to process that whole thing. I think when I got home, I actually shut it down to some extent.

That's what I found is some of the hardest work in all of this, is to work with my psyche. The ego doesn't want to get on the bandwagon and feel like you're special. My ego wants to be normal and ordinary. My ego wants to move away from anything that seems too extraordinary. And there's a conflict between being different and being special, and what's seen as special and being ordinary, equal or the same as everybody else.

Later that day, after that experience with the Dalai Lama in the dream, it was still going for quite a long time. There was also a lot of light radiance. Somebody asked me to bless some statues. I blessed these statues, and the woman started shaking for about 45 minutes. She couldn't stop shaking after I blessed her statues, and they actually turned into light in my hands. From an American point of view, this is a lot to integrate psychologically, when you just basically want to be a normal person. It's like, "Oh my God, this is really strange." How do you come to terms with the fact that there's a lot of power coming through you, and yet, it's really not you? It doesn't have anything to do with the ego, but the ego has to somehow learn to just sort of be okay with all this, and mellow out.

I think having power or being a powerful woman is a whole topic in and of itself. It is a huge topic. I mean everybody I know that's a woman, we've all had visions and dreams of being burned at the stake, all this kind of thing. Dealing with that, dealing with all kinds of trauma which I think is personal, collective, and archetypal requires

persistence. I think there's part of the psyche that gets afraid. And then, as the psyche shuts down, the body shuts down.

I think it's not so much that it's a lot for the body to adjust to, I think the root of all that is really the psyche. If the psyche is okay, the body can kind of get with the program. But it's the psyche that really pulls the strings in a certain sense, and the unconscious fears, or whatever material that's there probably due to past personal history, and collective archetypal history needs to be worked through. The ego can feel like it's not safe.

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My mom said when I was really little, like 3, I used to beg to go to funerals and graveyards. In Tibetan Buddhism we practice like that, and I think it carried over from my previous lives. She said it was astounding, how much I used to want to go there. I've *always* just loved funerals and memorials. As a child, I didn't know what it was, it was just a feeling. But as I've been older, I feel like I like funerals because something very real is happening. I think a lot of our society has felt very false to me, and it feels like people get more real then. I like that.

I'm the type where embodiment has been hard for me. I always wanted to go back to my other place. It was like I had a *very*, very positive memory of before this life, and of death. I always sort of thought death was the good part, it's where you get to go back to the stars, and freedom. Everything is really blissful, and you don't have a body. I have had to really work very hard to actualize awakening in the body. I've been working on it all these years, since I was a teenager. It's not an easy project. It's not a fast project. So I've never feared death, or had a bad feeling about it. I also never really got what people

thought what was so great about being here. That has changed now, however, as dharma has integrated more into my psyche and body.

I had a dream when I was 3 years old that my spiritual teachers came to me, and it kind of triggered my mind to remember why I came here. My mom said I wouldn't eat before that, and she was worried I was going to starve to death. I would hardly eat anything. I remember waking after this dream and thinking, "Okay, I accept being here, I remember why I'm here." It wasn't so conceptual, but I said, "Okay, I'm going to eat here. I'm going to eat food." And I remember going to the kitchen and eating something. So there's something about the whole eating thing, and being willing to be embodied. Because I felt like this place is like a lot of suffering. And really being embodied, is like really being with the suffering. It's been easier for me as my understanding of emptiness has dawned.

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It used to be that, I mean, this is terrible, but I just have to tell you, it used to be actually that if somebody told me I was going to die, I probably would have been really happy. Even though by all accounts, I've had a very good life. I never was abused. I had an upper middle class, well educated family. My parents loved me, they're very supportive. But I just didn't get what was so great about being here. Now I don't feel that way any more. I finally really worked through that. Now I'm happy either way.

My mom died last September. That was a *really*, really incredible experience, going through the death process with her, and helping her die and go into the light. I've learned how to help track people through the Bardo. I do a lot of stuff being a Tibetan lama with this kind of thing, so I work with that quite a bit. I've learned to be able to tune into, to understand where people are in the process after they die, and help them through

that process. My mom actually didn't need too much help. Being with her the last few days before she died was like being with a high teacher, it was like a total Darshan. It was this incredible feeling of blessing and love, that just stayed in the house for months afterward because she died here.

I do also experience the incredible preciousness of our situation here. Being here, being in the body, being in the human condition on this planet, and having the teachings that we do. I think that has profoundly changed through my Dharma practice and the work that I've done on myself. I've come to a profound appreciation of the preciousness of this situation, and have, for the most part, gotten over my aversion to the situation.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, it is believed that the whole body has to transform. And so the practices specifically work with mental, emotional, physical transformation. I've done lots of this kind of practice, and then had to work psychologically through my not wanting to be here. I've had to really affirm wanting to be here and really work with that, and work through facing what I didn't really like here. I've had a lot of problems really coming to terms with the amount of violence on this planet. That was really hard for me. That was part of why I didn't really think it was such a great place. People seemed really vicious to me here. For the most part, I *have* come to terms with that. In the last few years I've done a lot of work with really facing that and seeing it. And also seeing the spiritual reality and truth that is here, simultaneously, everywhere, all the time. This is what allows me to be with the suffering.

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I do think it's generally different, being in a female or a male body. I think realization and actual Being is genderless, and personally I never really had gender issues much. I think because my mother and grandmother, and the women in my family were

very independent and emancipated. I think there is a way that women are generally connected in, unless you have a very male personality, in a female body. I think there's a way that women are tuned in. Certainly for me, the whole experience of childbirth, and the whole experience of being pregnant was such an incredibly amazing experience. I had both my kids at home, and naturally. I actually experienced, with both of them, the entire first year of their life I was with them, in a state of complete bliss, physically and emotionally. That experience of being a vehicle for life, and feeling life in your body is wonderful. And then having that life come through you, and nurturing a child, holding a child, all of that is deeply satisfying. It was so fulfilling for me, and just so rich. And like I said, so blissful, feeling like I was in bliss and love with the child, that we were in this state together. So that is something that occurs for some women.

I've been in a spiritual teacher's group for a number of years, and it's mostly made up of men. It's been very interesting over all the years that we've met to just see how differently we're wired up. I think I'm actually pretty archetypally feminine, although I have a very strong masculine side. But my basic personality is much more feminine. It's just interesting to see how different it is, like the men are much more goal-oriented, much more striving even as spiritual practitioners. For instance, I never expected any results from my spiritual practice, and when they came, it was surprising. Where it's more like the guys are expecting, and waiting. And then if it doesn't happen, they're like, "Well, what's wrong with this?" They work much more to fulfill certain ego needs. I think it's actually a more important psychological task for a male. I think in our society, it's actually crucial for males to establish an identity in the world. I think it's psychologically imperative that they really meet their own standards, whatever that is internally. If they don't meet their own standards, I think there's a lot of problems.

Where I think women, our identity issues are a little more fluid. As research has shown, we are more relational.

I've had periods in my life where I've basically been simply a mother and a wife, and gardened or whatever, and I'm completely happy. I haven't really needed an outside identity. I think in that sense there's a way that we can sort of tune into a more flowing way, and not have to have such particular kinds of identities. Now obviously it's not true for all women, but I think that's more feminine in nature. I think somehow the way it's all sort of wired up internally, there is a difference. It does have to do with the body and the emotions.

The way I look at it is, we're just beginning to actually explore feminine spirituality. I think pretty much everything that's happened up to this point has been the male model. Basically in our culture, even the whole goddess trip and all that, I think it's sort of a slight take off on the male model. I think the feminine has emerged to some extent, but I think it's in the very initial stages. I think there's a whole profound understanding that we really don't have yet. And because the feminine is non-conceptual in nature, the understanding isn't conceptual. It has to come in a whole different kind of way. When this happens more and more, I think we'll be able to discuss and conceptualize the feminine more articulately. I think the real feminine experience is non-conceptual. And I think that's why it's been hard for us to actually move into that, because we're very conceptual, culturally, in Western society.

Patricia

Patricia is a 55-year-old Chinese-American woman who is a spiritual intuitive counselor in private practice, a meditation teacher and Buddhist practitioner. She is the mother of two. Patricia lives in San Diego, California.

The experience of my body has evolved over time. I would say that it took me a very long time to actually claim my body. From the time I was a child, I basically was out of my body a lot, because of the situation that I grew up in. The way that I coped with having a body was to basically live outside of the body, and to some degree deny what my body was. I had to go through a whole evolutionary process of, first of all, going through identity issues, because I had culture issues. I had racial identity issues. Because I'm of a specific ethnic background—and living in a country in which that is not the primary population of the country—I had to go beyond physical appearance, in terms of identity. In other words, I had a lot of confusion going on. I was Chinese-American, and had pretty strong Chinese values. But I was raised in a black ghetto, South-Central Los Angeles. I basically wanted to identify with being black, because that was the primary culture that was going on. I was in a Chinese body wanting to be black—in America, where, if you were really going to be selected, you would be white.

I think that often times the karmic reason for being born into that kind of situation is basically that you are forced to look for a spiritual identity. You can't just look in the mirror, look at your body, and say, "This is who I am." Because you don't really fit in. If you fit in, then maybe you would have the illusion that that's who you are. You can have the illusion that the body that you're looking at in the mirror is actually who you are, which of course it isn't. Your body certainly expresses you. It certainly is a vehicle for your spirit. But it isn't who you are, whatever that means.

I think I've always had an awareness of something like past lives, even though this is not a culture that supports that, and even though I didn't have a religion when I was young that supported that. I feel like it was just something I always kind of knew. Even the people in the Chinese community, when they would look at me, they didn't think I looked Chinese. They thought I looked Mongolian, or Eskimo, or Mayan. When I lived in Mexico—I actually had my second child in Mexico—I would have my baby wrapped in a riboso and go to the marketplace, and the Indians thought I was Mayan. So they spoke to me in Indian dialect. I basically could pass for a lot of different cultures, rather than just Chinese. The Chinese didn't really think I looked that Chinese. In a sense, the message to me was that there was already kind of a transcendence going on. I was already transcending one particular cultural or racial identity.

I feel like part of the reason I came into those circumstances was to learn that you can't really be identified with your body, that there does have to be something other than just your physical appearance that defines you. When you talk about how I experience my body in present time, I feel like I had to reclaim my body. It was not just on a spiritual level of, "Okay, I'm spirit coming into body." And that my body expresses my spirit, that my spirit has lived beyond this body. So it doesn't matter whether I'm in a black body, a white body, a female body, a male body, that I've been in various bodies before. All of that kind of collective memory comes with you in the body. Even though in this particular body, I'm female. I have to function in the world as a female, and as a Chinese-American person. When people look at you they see female, and they see a Chinese-American person, and certainly that was part of an identity that I had to come to terms with. There are so many other threads to understand, though—that one runs male and female energy, that you could have been whatever in past lives. I had a strong identity

with Egyptian stuff for awhile, and African stuff. So basically it's *understanding* that just really allowed me to finally say, "Okay, this is my body now," and really ground in it.

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In doing intuitive work, there's a lot of your memory. You awaken memory that goes all the way back to Atlantis, and all these different kinds of incarnations. Then the body itself doesn't become limiting. The body itself becomes a vehicle. It's like, "Okay, this is the body I have now. It's a good body, it expresses me. I want to be female in this lifetime." And you begin to understand what your purpose as a female person is. So that really allowed me to come to acceptance, real acceptance of my body. But it took a long time to do that. Once I came into that kind of spiritual acceptance of my body, the other level was reclaiming my body in the psychological sense, emotional sense. I am not just my mother's daughter, although I was born to these parents for whatever reason. Part of reclaiming my own body had to do with coming into acceptance that I had my own purpose for living. And I think that I incarnated for my own reasons on the soul level, and that whatever agenda anyone else might have had for me, is their agenda.

For women, you're basically raised to believe that you're going to become an adjunct to someone else, and become an appendage or something like that, particularly in Asian cultures. But it exists in every culture I think, in the patriarchal time that we live in. Coming to the realization that I had my own purpose was really something that had to be reclaimed through a psychological-emotional process, which cut across the grain of who I thought I was supposed to be as a woman. This had a lot to do with female identity, and what you're really here for, particularly since I had children when I was quite young. I had a strong identity as a mother. When you have children, you're there for the children. You're not really there for yourself. But then eventually when I claimed my own purpose,

I realized that part of my purpose was to have these children, and who they were to me, how we taught each other whatever we needed. It allowed me to also give them separate identities, that they're also here for their own purpose, and not just to be appendages to other people. So reclaiming that through a sense of purpose, was really what allowed me to own my body. Like, "Okay, I choose to be here." I chose to be born.

§

In my early years, I was mostly out of my body. Then in order to begin the process of finding my body again, I needed to pull in an understanding of a larger identity, which you might term transcendence. Then once I had the possibility of a larger identity, then it made it okay to come back and start working on myself.

I would say that before I claimed my body, you're just kind of picking up energies all the time, all over the place. Just kind of absorbing whatever's there. I was basically disconnected with what I needed. You can find yourself doing a lot of things in your life that have nothing in the world to do with you. Which then begins to feel like a real energy drain. And when you feel like your energy's being drained, it's hard to even know on a daily basis how you're going to conduct your life in a sense. I would say that that was a major change. Some of it has to do with just a maturation process. I think everyone goes through this no matter what their experience is. The older you get, the more you feel like you have less time. And if you have less time, you have to be much more careful about what you do with your time.

If you're really caught up in a cycle of not answering to yourself, but answering to everything that's around you, the soul gets pretty depressed. Because the soul says, "Well what am I doing hanging out in this body, if I can't even do what I'm supposed to do?" What you are really supposed to do may have nothing to do with what it looks like you're

supposed to be doing. Sometimes people have to risk looking pretty radical, or doing things that just don't fit in with everything else.

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I had all kinds of physical problems when I was a child. I had a hyperthyroid condition, which I think had to do with the fact that I couldn't really express myself. To me, in retrospect, it was like a lot of energy getting around the thyroid, which is the fifth chakra. That just wasn't getting expressed. Then I used to get a lot of nosebleeds, and I had this rash on my hands. To me, that was related to anger. In retrospect, I had a lot of anger that I couldn't express, so I had this rash. Then starting from about my last year in Junior High School, I had terrible allergies.

Then somewhere in my later 20s, when I started meditating, I realized that whenever I was meditating, I was really centered. I had no allergic reactions, no matter what the weather was like, whether it was Spring or whatever. There was something about being centered that just reduced the allergic reactions. To me, the allergies is exactly what it is on a physical level, which is that there is this kind of invasion that happens. There's allergens in the air, and then your immune system isn't strong enough to fight off the allergens. What that represents on an energetic level is that you're kind of getting invaded by energy. You need to clear your space of all the energy that doesn't belong to you. When you're in your center, then you have strong enough boundaries to keep the stuff at bay. When you get weakened, all that energy comes in and invades you. So that started me on doing energetic work. I would basically energetically clean myself out every day.

Now it's like I occasionally still have an allergic reaction, but it's never anything that's debilitating. It used to be debilitating, and now I don't even notice. It's kind of like

you sneeze once in awhile or something. That was a big physical change, the difference between feeling bombarded by everything that wasn't me, to finding a center inside of myself, then occupying myself more and more. Then that whole sense of invasion was no longer an issue. That was the major change. I feel like now, I don't have any major systems that are problematic on an ongoing basis. I think that that's part of just continuing to check in that the communication between body and spirit is good.

§

I practice Tibetan Buddhism, and the groundwork of Tibetan Buddhism is, first of all, that the human body is very precious. That's one of the first premises, so that you don't waste time, and you really use your body for the benefit of all sentient beings. I think that if I had had that concept early on, it would have been really maligned in a sense. Because to think that you had a body for all sentient beings, when you don't even have boundaries, and you're absorbing everybody's energy, it could be a big distortion. You could get really whacked out, and think, "Okay, I'm just here to be trampled on." I think that if that concept had come in before I had claimed myself, it would have been very maligned.

My spiritual practice feels like my coming to myself in my own embodiment, really grounding in my own purpose, which ultimately has the motivation of having some benefit to everyone around me. That's part of the practice. The preciousness of the human body is also one part of the practice. This is all about embodiment, to some degree. Suffering exists. The acceptance of suffering, the acceptance of pain, I think is really important. Because in fact life is impermanent. When you realize impermanence, and you realize that there is suffering, then you can fully accept that and you're not trying to avoid or dodge it. You're not trying to dodge your own pain. You just understand. But you also

aren't a victim of it, because it's not like you're being targeted. It's just the nature of reality. And it's the nature of reality because it's created by our own minds, in that we're all in this together. We kind of create samsara together. To the extent to which we accept that, then you actually become empowered through the acceptance of that, to use your body in the best way possible. The practice is really a support for embodiment, and really a support for understanding the meaning of having a body.

The realm of having a body is one particular realm. We come into this realm of having the body in order to have certain kinds of experiences that actually accelerate the evolutionary process. Because if we didn't have three-dimensional reality and three-dimensional bodies, then everything would be mind reality. And mind reality is fine, except that I think it's harder to get what it really is. But when you have a body, which is part of samsara, then you actually experience the pain that is caused by these kinds of thought realities. And when you experience that, that would propel us to look for what is the origin and source of this, and how to stop this from happening. I think to some extent that's one of the purposes of embodiment, to get it faster.

§

I think that before I could really shift my sexuality, I had to come into a relationship with my own needs, and feel as if I was the one who was primarily connected to my own needs. I had to be able to answer to myself internally, before I could actually relate to another person from the place of truly feeling passion. The sexual drive is not necessarily a hormonal thing. I relate to it more as a relationship of passion within the self. I do tantric practice, which is not necessarily partnered tantric practice, although it could be. It's really an internal moving of elements and energy inside of oneself, and it is your own process of creation. It is an awakening of passion that could be

directed towards a person, but even though I'm in partnership with someone, I don't necessarily want to direct it towards a person. I'm in relationship with someone who is as adamant about his own spiritual practice as I am, so we have something else going on besides each other. It just creates a lot more space.

§

I would say that in the past whenever I thought of 'I,' I would relate it to certain kinds of feelings or sensations that I had, located in particular places in my body. Because in a sense I think that was where I was stuck. It's kind of like, if I needed to have ego or something like that, then the 'I' would be kind of in the seat of the ego. But a lot of the practices have to do with getting the 'I' out of the way. So when I say 'I,' I am probably referring to primary consciousness that is operating, and certainly referring to the mind. And the mind in a sense is not located in one particular place. The mind is kind of everywhere.

What I would like to refer to as the 'I' is basically the heart, that when you say 'I,' you're in your heart. The 'I' is not as important as it used to be. There was a certain point when I was going through a lot of ego identity stuff with 'I,' it had specific meanings and was very important, and now it's not so much. And if I were to refer to that, I would definitely reference myself to the heart. But I don't know exactly what that means.

I would not say that the 'I' is just the mind, but I would say that most of the time when one is referring to the 'I,' that the mind is involved in that. When there's emptiness, there's no 'I.' Because when you're in the space where there's no thought process, there's no 'I.' And it doesn't matter. It's not that you particularly merge into everything else. I think what you're talking about is not the 'I.' You're talking about a reference point, and I think that's breath. It's not particularly that there's an 'I,' because once you think

there's an 'I,' there's a thought process going on. But if there's no thought process, the awareness that you might have that is still defining yourself as body, is your breath. As long as you're aware that you're breathing, then you're aware that you have body. But being aware that you have body is not necessarily an 'I' awareness. It's just breath. So you can be aware of breath, and connected to breath, which makes you aware that you still are embodied, without having a particular distinction that says, "I am me." It's just awareness of body that's connected to breath.

§

I hold it as death of the body. I mean, I definitely believe that there's some continuation, and I don't think that there's necessarily continuation, even at the soul level, in the same form that we lived in this body. In other words, there are strands of energy that we bring into a composite existence in one particular embodiment, and that when we die, that disperses. It may come back together, or certain strands of energy may come back together. But it may not be particularly linear in the sense of, "Okay, I was so-and-so in this past life, and then I incarnated in the next lifetime and I'm exactly that so-and-so that I was in the past life." In other words, you take propensities with you, which are your certain tendencies that you might want to work out in a particular body. You may not take other parts of yourself that maybe you're not working on in that body, or they may go into another body to work out things. I believe that there is definitely a continuum, but the continuum is not so linear. When a soul goes into the bardo state, there is a breaking up of energy, and then a reconfiguring of what is going to incarnate in the next body.

Death has definitely changed my life. Particularly recently, because I have a friend who is dying of cancer, and I had a couple of friends who have died, and my

mother died recently. It's pretty present for me. I think the way it affects me is to realize that it's very important to do what one has to do, just in terms of the time that you have, but also being on your path, and taking care of what you have to take care of. I think also death has brought more acceptance in terms of people coming into their bodies. They do what they have to do, they do it in the best way that they can, and when they're ready to leave, they leave. And that one is actually living right up to the last moment, the last breath you're living, because everything that happens is still being absorbed. It is still being transformative, up until you actually take your last breath on this particular plane. Then the learning of this particular plane, at least for that body, is finished. But then the consciousness definitely goes on. Because of the work I do, I do connect with consciousness that has moved on, so there's no question about how the consciousness continues.

In terms of my own relationship to death, I don't ever really remember being afraid of death. It's not something that I've ever felt. My friend who's dying of cancer right now, she says to me all the time that she's not afraid at all of dying. I've kind of felt the same way. In fact, I think my relationship to death has always been, I'd rather sort of be there than be here. I've always kind of had that feeling, like this is the harder place to be. Or maybe this is the bad dream and that's the good dream. So that part doesn't bother me. I think that when one is young, you really don't think about the deterioration of the body, and how that's a very natural process. As one gets older, then you realize that that's a reality.

I think that being in a body is always an opportunity, and that if you do a lot of work on yourself, then you have a lot of benefit that you accrue in your life. When you get to old age, you may also have the possibility that if you go through a certain kind of

illness experience or something, that you could take care of a lot of karma. If it's the most efficient way of doing it, then people will do it that way even if it involves pain. I don't think we can predetermine why these things happen, like why people have to experience what they experience. I think that the important thing about death for me is just accepting what it is.

I had a lot of experiences like, when my father died, which was maybe about 20 years ago, sitting in the funeral service and just feeling his presence, like I knew he was watching. I knew he was checking out everybody who was there. I think I was about 7 or 8 years old when my grandfather died, and I just knew that he was still alive someplace. I can't remember where there was a point where I didn't really believe that.

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When I was in psychic training, which was kind of like a ministership type of training, what we were taught at that time is that in the evolutionary cycle, there had to be a period of time where—like when Christ died on the cross, and then he resurrected—people had to learn how to leave their bodies. Like they would sit in caves and meditate, and they would learn how to leave their bodies because the experience of leaving their body was proof that they were not their bodies. It was kind of proof that it was spirit. Once you identify that there is spirit, then the next cycle of evolution has to do with embodied spirit. So you disembody yourself in order to learn that spirit does exist. But once you do that, then the next cycle is that you bring spirit into body, so that body can be spirit manifested. It's an integration process of coming back into body, integrating spirit with body.

This teacher that we had used to say that a lot of the beings who would come in for psychic readings were beings who had been enlightened before, which means that

they had already learned how to leave their bodies. But then they're still here. Why are they still here? I mean, if you got enlightened, then why are you still incarnating again? And it was because we *had* that experience, now we have to learn how to manifest spirit and body. So there actually is a reason to be back in a body, to take it to the next step, which is that you learn how to be in the body, as opposed to doing all these practices to learn how to leave the body.

§

I don't think conscious embodiment is more so for women. I think that women are just a little bit ahead of the game, so that the women can actually be teachers in this. The women are getting it more quickly, and on some level, the women will be helping the men, or teaching them how to do this. I don't think it's more of a women's issue necessarily. But I do think that it's women who are responding to it as an issue, and willing to work on it, willing to address it. Eventually men will also do that. If you were to talk to a group of men now about being in their bodies or not, sometimes it's not even identifiable that they're not in their bodies. Because if you're being very practical, and you're being very physical, it can seem like you're in your body. But the fact is that there are a lot of seemingly physical people who are still in their minds. It's a mental thing rather than an embodied thing. I think it is a new thing that's happening, and I think that women are at the forefront of doing this. But it's not particularly more of a women's issue.

One can say that women have more of an issue being embodied because their bodies are more vulnerable. For women who have been abused or raped or something, getting into their bodies is more of an obvious kind of healing that needs to happen. I think that men have this also, I mean men have had to fight wars. What do you do when

you fight a war? You leave your body, there's no other way to deal with it. I think it's an issue for everybody. But I think women are definitely more willing to deal with it now. It's like the dakini energy—the dakinis are kind of like the wisdom sky goers. I think that women sometimes are the ones who tap in and know what needs to be done. Certainly the connection to the earth through the body is part of a woman's experience that lends to that, but I also think that spiritually, women are often in the role of the transformers. That is the female wisdom energy.

Arline

Arline is a 67-year-old Jewish-American woman who worked for many years as a nurse—midwifing people through both the birthing, and dying process. She is the mother of three, and a longtime practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Arline lives in Ben Lomond, California.

First of all, I never set out to recover my body or inhabit my body. It didn't happen like that at all. There was a strong wish and desire in my youth and teens to be liked, to be popular, to be accepted. More or less I was, but I didn't feel it deep inside of me. When I was in my last year of nursing school, I met my husband-to-be. He was an OB/GYN resident at the hospital where I was a senior student nurse. There was an instant attraction, and we had a short engagement and we got married fairly quickly. I got pregnant a month afterwards. There was a lot of haste and grasping on my part onto this happiness, this rescuing me, this new prestige. This new secure situation with someone, with my husband.

But what happened is that after the baby was born, and I was 20 and 1/2, I started experiencing a lot of disturbing feelings—about my past, my marriage, my sexuality, about being a mother. Just a lot of inner turmoil and pain. I was quite meek and unable to assess and discriminate. I went into psychotherapy for the first time.

During this period of time I first explored feelings I had suppressed about being sexually molested by three different men, over a period of 10 years. Two were relatives, one a neighbor. I was unable to tell my mother and this led to further confused feelings. While it is fortunate I was not raped, nonetheless the inappropriate fondling and secrecy surrounding it certainly shaped my behavior for decades to come.

I had a second son at age 22, and when my daughter was born I was 25. She had a big impact on my life. She was quite a powerful being from the very beginning. I was determined for her to be raised in a lot more physical safety, or emotional safety, than I had had in my own childhood. She had much more freedom of expression. I gave her a lot of attention and affection, and she blossomed accordingly. Her strong personality had a chance to manifest. Whether it was her stamping her foot or demanding something, or insisting on something, in a way I sort of learned how to do that from her. I could see a small female person in the full growth of her power and her position in the family. I saw her come forth kind of naturally, and it was inspiring to me, to see that in my own healing process. I do believe you have to go back at some point or another in your life, in your development, your evolution. I believe you have to go back to that age or time when you were cut off from the natural flow of things, to when the power of your own *being* was suppressed. You have to go back to when you started to develop defense mechanisms, behaviors, and survival techniques that coalesce together to form a personality, rather than one's essence and natural attributes. It was very helpful to me to have a child who was also a Leo, a little Leo girl, and to see how some degree of unfetteredness, security, natural ebullience, and energy manifests.

All of this therapy that I was undergoing was taking place in the late 50s and early 60s, when there were a lot of pop psychology books being written. There were a lot more publications in the human potential movement, which was just beginning, and the women's liberation movement was arising. There was a lot more courage, original thinking, and change among women than earlier in my life and my marriage. I began to stretch and blossom with that input, as much as possible inside the confines of this marriage, with a very traditional husband who was 11 years older than me. He was quite

threatened by any evidence of growth and expansion on my part. I began really blossoming, opening, taking guitar lessons, performing in a school play, dancing. Just opening up and beginning to spread my wings. This was quite problematic for him. Somewhere in there, as a result of all this, I had developed some kind of inner strength where I had never had it before, to be my own person.

Always it had been me that cleaned up our marital fights and arguments. And then there was a fight again over something, and after he went to work, I had some kind of real wave of courage and strength of opinion that I'd never felt before. And it was like, "I am not going to prostitute myself one more time to make this okay, because it's not okay. I am not going to back down. I'll do whatever I have to to stand my ground." And I did. I had embodied some of the psychological gains that I had made. I had now embodied and integrated them, so I was able to stand up and say, "No!" I told him that I wanted a divorce, and he just freaked.

Eventually he moved out and I began to get really light and happy, and experience in this body a feeling that there had been something on my back for a really long time, my back and shoulders, that I didn't even know that I was carrying. I didn't notice it until it was gone. I now felt a certain lightness of being.

I started seeing an innovative psychiatrist. He was going to different workshops every week, and he was going to Esalen. He was just beginning to incorporate Gestalt into his practice, and experiment with this innovative method with his patients. I spent about 3 months seeing him intensively, and he put me through a lot of Gestalt exercises. I remember we were in a big empty room, and he was trying to get me to get into my feelings, and I had no idea what he was talking about. He picked up a pillow and threw it at me. I laughed, and then he picked up another one and threw it at me with a bit of force.

He did these non-verbal things that got me to erupt into some kind of feeling, and a lot of pent-up negative emotions spilled forth. The session was extremely dynamic, and cracked me open in a way that had been sealed probably since I was a child and had had tantrums.

I entered a level of working in therapy where “we were on the floor,” and there was then some light body work involved. My therapist had started learning about Neo-Reichian therapy. He led me into some breath awareness things, and all of the while I'm having amazing internal experiences in the felt sense, of not just talk therapy, but feeling it in my body. Feeling cellular experiences. Having memories flood up, or feelings of rightness and normality in the particular area. This was information and intelligence that was blocked to me before. In the course of these therapies with him, I became more and more in my body, not in my head.

Eventually I filed for divorce. The next couple of years were quite stormy, with the after-effects of the divorce. All kinds of family dynamics—running away children, suicide attempts by my ex-husband, behavior eruptions. Everything was very difficult to manage. I was in and out of therapy during this time, increasingly using methods that went into the body.

Then about 2 years after the divorce I got together with who turned out to be my second husband. I had a very, very powerful physical attraction to him. I had, in my marriage, been essentially frozen. I had been essentially non-orgasmic. I gave a lot of warmth and affection, and then of course I had pretended, but I had not had an authentic blossom of my own sexuality. But when I met my second husband, we had an extremely powerful passionate sexual love affair. By now it was the late 60s, and I was getting very interested in drugs and sex and rock 'n roll, the way that permeated the culture, the whole new movement in the culture. I was spending every possible moment with my new

husband-to-be, and having amazing sexual awakenings and experiences. This in turn fed my growing awareness—growing, growing awareness—in all of my consciousness senses. Every aspect of my body was more awake, more alive, more involved, more concerned. I was having more, and more, and more full experiences of everything, including sexuality. It was a very rich and ripe awakening time. This passion led to marriage, and probably there wasn't enough basis for marriage, for eventually we did split up.

There we were in the Santa Cruz Mountains, having a wonderful time with all the others that had moved there. This was absolutely the scene in the early 70s—music, experimental lifestyles, back to nature, small is beautiful, and simple living. It was a time of exploration and experimentation, an adolescent joy actually that I hadn't known in my adolescence, nor had my husband. It was most unfortunate that what we were doing was raising my adolescent children. On the fun level of it we did a lot of things together like go to concerts, explore and experiment in those ways together. But on the down side, my children didn't have the kind of parental control and firm authority that they needed. I feel like I made some big mistakes there that I have regrets about.

Their father, my first husband, took his life after we had been living in the Santa Cruz Mountains for only 6 months. That was quite devastating for everybody, quite devastating. It sent me back into more therapy, only by this time I was doing deep tissue body work. I had already had quite a few Rolfing sessions, and then I was having work done on me that was called structural integration. Lots and lots of deep, deep tissue work.

I had started doing yoga right around 1970, and this was a complete revelation to me. I took to it like a duck to water. I thought I had died and gone to heaven, it was so blissful, psychophysically and spiritually. I would sometimes do yoga twice a day. It was

an amazing opening for me. I feel like that was the beginning for me of the chapter that opened spirituality. I just knew that I loved it and it felt wonderful, but I didn't know what was happening at all. I just knew the exquisite bliss of the movements. Where I had been cramped up, bottled up for so long, was now opening, extending, arching, and becoming graceful, where it was once stiff, klutzy, and clunky. This incredible chapter of my life started when I was about 36.

Every time I would have deep body work done, there was a tremendous amount of pain where there was blockage and holding. Somehow through my yoga—I started with kundalini yoga—I learned and intuitively began fooling around with breath of fire, and intentional breathing. I learned on my own to breathe through the pain of the Rolfing, so that I could come out the other side into the most exquisite spacious ecstasy, with lights flashing and even chords and choruses of sounds. Just incredible spiritual experiences. I didn't know that's what it was at the time. I learned by the union of these methods, and a lot of intuitiveness that was allowing me to stretch *here* when I was being rolfed, breathe *here*, pant *there*, or curl up *there*. It was just like working in a dance with the therapist who was working on my body..

All during this time I was dabbling into Eastern mysticism, as was everyone else at that time who was the slightest bit awakened. Then in 1975 I went to Nepal, to an organized month-long workshop which was called “Psychology and Meditation.” We were living with a Nepalese family. Every day a Theravadan Buddhist monk would come to our little group of 16 people. This monk came and taught us Vipassana meditation for maybe 20 minutes in the afternoon, and gave us a little dharma talk. Then all during that time we were touring around Katmandu, going into the Himalayas, really drinking in the culture, the spirituality, and the energy in the air of that region. Everything got kicked up

to another level of intelligence which was the higher chakras of opening the heart, and opening higher up the energy circuit. That's what started happening for me there.

It was there at the end of that month that quite coincidentally, I met the Tibetan lamas who went on to become my masters. I had my first taste of the spiritual tradition, Tibetan Buddhism. I just stumbled into it because I met these two lamas in 1975. I had been powerfully impacted with a very strong embodied experience that they gave me, to really imprint me with their spiritual power. I went on in the following years to become their disciple. I began then to include, and now to favor Tibetan Buddhist practices as the methodology that I'm using now to go deeper and further. I feel that everything that I've described to you that I did up to the point where I met the lamas, and a few years later when I seriously began practices, that all that was preparatory practices. Opening the ground, laying the groundwork, opening and preparing me so that I was ready.

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While on an extended solitary Tibetan Buddhist retreat I was, I thought, very much in love with a man who was completely unavailable to me. It was a very reciprocal situation, but it was ill-fated love, not to be. In my first 5 weeks of retreat I was completely obsessed with thoughts of this man. I couldn't concentrate on anything else. I was trying to meditate, and I was completely flooded with obsessive thoughts about this man. It was totally mental torture. I had no control of it. It was a familiar feeling to me. I could say, looking back, that I had been very romantically and sexually, male-oriented my whole life. This was very much a core reason for being that informed much of my life. So here I am, out of control and helpless to my mind. On this one particular night when it was very bad, I called out to my Lama, "Help me, help me, help me here, I can't stand this anymore."

That night I had, I couldn't call it a dream, it was too vivid and present for a dream. It felt like a vision or a visitation. I had a very, very powerful experience. In this vision I was in the hospital, my local hospital, and I was in a hospital bed with the head elevated, and I was a man. I had dark hair. I was about 38 years old, and I was lying in a bed having just had heart surgery. I had this huge bandage on my chest, covering the incision. I was just reclining and resting on the bed. Then a nurse entered the room. She was wearing a white cap, a white sweater, and a white uniform. The nurse was me also. I was both the patient and the nurse. I had come to change the dressing. I was very comforting to the patient, which was also myself. I very carefully removed this giant dressing and exposed the incision, which was a big, red cross. It was an up and down and across incision. I very carefully took the edges of the incision and peeled them back like petals, to expose what I realized was the heart cave. I looked inside the heart cave of my own chest, and I saw my heart. I saw my heart beating, and my heart was swimming in a pool of pus. Yellow-green pus. Poison. I very carefully drew the curtains around the bed so no one would disturb us, and I closed the door so we could be very private in this public hospital.

I took from the sleeve of my white sweater the treatment that I had concealed. It was a non-traditional, unconventional treatment. I removed from my sleeve this gorgeous, glowing, praying mantis. This phosphorescent, bright green, large insect was bent forward with the front paws together, in the kneeling posture, praying. *Praying mantis*. I very, very carefully lowered this insect into the heart cave. The praying mantis leaned forward and very elegantly, very delicately began lapping up the pus, eating the pus as if it were nectar. It completely cleaned out every trace of purulence, every trace of poison. Cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, until it was all gone. The praying mantis was full

and satisfied. I removed it and then closed the incision, and it sort of magically sprung together. I put the bandage back on. Then I woke up.

I woke up in the middle of the night. This was so vivid, and I am not a person who usually remembers my dreams. This was so vivid that I sat up and turned on the light and wrote the whole thing down. Layers and layers and layers of meaning kept becoming revealed to me. The meditation practice that I was doing was one in which I was visualizing both the male and the female aspects of myself.

In the retreat that I was doing, I did four formal sessions a day starting at four in the morning. I did my first one, then I had breakfast. Then I did my second one, then I relaxed and did yoga and had lunch and did a little artwork. Then I went into my third session at about two o'clock. I was well into my third session when the thought occurred to me that I hadn't once thought of this man. Not all day. It was the first day this had happened since I'd been in retreat. He hadn't crossed my mind until this moment when I was making the assessment that I hadn't thought of him. Then I started noticing how I was feeling, sitting there on my cushion. There was this certain sensation that was gone—a certain gnawing, an uncomfortable gnawing feeling of wanting. A feeling of wanting, longing, craving. Deep, deep, deep in my groin is where I felt it. In my bowels and in my groin. Some kind of a feeling of wanting. In my pelvis, sitting on a cushion, what I felt was this tremendous pelvic expansion.

Something that was once tight was relaxed now. It felt like my womb, but it was more than my womb. It was huge. It was a flowing, open feeling in my pelvis. Then in my gut, a gnawing sensation was no longer there. And again, I was not aware of even having it until it was gone. Then this phrase came into my mind that I'd seen, in reading some dharma book or other along the years; the phrase popped into my mind and I

realized what was gone. What was gone was *longing desire*. The gnawing was connected to the longing wanting, and the desire was connected to some sort of a sensation in my groin that I guess I could connect with desire. Was it an itch, was it a lust, was it a hormonal thing, was it some sort of whatever it is that the female species exudes to attract the male? I don't know, but it wasn't there. I was so blown away by this, I can't tell you. I was so blown away by this.

It took me several years after the retreat to get used to the fact that it was really true that I had lost interest in having a mate, a partner, a sexual relationship. It's really true. And I still can hardly believe it, but it's really true. When I check in, or when I have the opportunity, what I notice my behavior is, is pulling back, not going towards. Something fell away that I wouldn't have given up of my own volition, but I did put myself in my guru's hands, and this was the unexpected result.

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In nursing school I was all the time surrounded by sick and dying people, and I was only 17 when I entered. I had to quickly gather some new adaptive defense mechanisms because I was terrified of death. Terrified of death. Terrified of having someone die on my shift. Or terrified of the part of nursing school where we learned how to prepare a body for the morgue, before you called the morgue to come and get the body. I often felt like I was in way over my head. Something kept me in nursing school despite these terrors. I had a lot of responsibility at a very young age because we worked on the wards of the hospital. By the time I was in my second year I was working evening and night shifts where I was the nurse in charge of 40 patients. Always, as I entered a shift, I would pray that no one would die on my shift so that I wouldn't need to confront my worst fears while on the job. That was the level of my fear.

I think it's primordial fear of death. I think it's pretty universal in any species. I think it's a lower brain type of thing, a survival mechanism. As I moved through life this fear of mine took some other forms: fear of heights, like fear of being on the edge of cliffs, those kind of heights. I had a dreadful fear of that. So I got to feel into the grips of that fear many times. One time driving South down Highway 1 and I was in the passenger seat on the edge of the cliff, I was in a state of terror the whole way. I had to take a tranquilizer and sit on the floor of the car in order to make it from Carmel to San Luis Obispo, where you're no longer on the edge of this cliff. When my children were young and I had active boys, we would go sightseeing to state parks and they would be near the edge of things. I experienced a lot of physical terror: my stomach turning over, my legs turning to jelly. Embodied fear. I also developed a fear of things flying around my head. Whether they were moths or even butterflies or birds, flying, flapping around my head. I would get hysterical, completely out of control with fear. Snakes. Mice. Just dissolve into terror. So the fear manifested in quite a few ways.

As I moved through the decades of therapies and body work and life experiences, I was in situations where I faced these terrors in the form of mice and snakes and decomposed things living in the woods. I experienced a lot of fear and revulsion, and it lessened and it lessened. I moved through it, and it lessened and lessened. I certainly made the discovery through all of my years of doing different therapies of body, mind, spiritual therapies, and breath, that you have to go through your fears and limitations to get out the other side. You have to go through it at some point or another. I feel like all of that work was to find myself, to discover who that "self" is. Then I began to move into essence, rather than personality.

That *essence*—I began to think along those words at about the time that I became a dharma student and began learning the Lam-rim (the graduated path to enlightenment), the teachings on the Buddhist philosophy of reincarnation, death, and impermanence. And moving along into the notion of *no self*, Mind being a continuous stream of energy which can't be destroyed, but reincarnates again and again, in many forms. And that there is no permanent, rigid self. I look back over my life from this vantage point and see that every step that I took was completely essential. Because I had made so many adaptations for survival, I had to recover my identity before I could let go of my ego. It was all very necessary.

I feel like I'm in a chapter now where a lot of my work is to dissolve that ego and to be less firmly identified with this body, even though this body is completely essential to do the work of this lifetime. And it's the house for this mind. Nevertheless, this body is not me. It's not 'I,' and I have much less solid sense of that identity than I ever did. I keep working on it. It's a very, very, very strong imprint. But it's necessary to loosen that, and let go of that identification if one is to get fully enlightened. So I developed ways of working with [that identification] because it seems very relevant to me—the notion of relative and ultimate. Many things exist on two levels simultaneously, relative and ultimate, and they are both true. They are equally valid.

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In this lifetime, I feel I've had two big themes, karmic themes to address to move me along towards enlightenment. I don't know what lifetime that will happen, but I feel like we move along, we move along, and sometimes we learn one big piece in one lifetime. And sometimes we really don't learn anything at all and we just keep recycling,

recycling, with the samsaric mind that has never awakened. So the first theme has to do with women's sexuality, and the other one is the fear of death.

I saw my first dead body when I was 9. It was when I was a fourth grade student and a boy in our class died. There was a class trip to the mortuary for anyone who wanted to go to pay our last respects. I wanted to go. I was completely horrified to see this waxen body in the casket that looked like the boy that I had played with, but he was not. It was like a log, he looked like a wax log. It was my first experience of what happens when you take the life force away from a person, and what remains is a body. I actually had the experience of it just being like a wax form. But my fear came in right behind that, and this waxen form had a purple bruise on the forehead, I think where the fatal concussion had taken place. I looked at that purple mark, and I actually became quite hysterical. That purple mark is what caused him to be in there dead and me to be alive, that one small thing. And it could happen to me, the thin line between living and dying. I was very frightened and had nightmares for many months. I would say that my really deep terror of death became known to me around that instance.

There was a year in 1984 when four very close people in my life died. One was a woman that was a dharma sister who had cancer in her mid-30s, and six of us came together to take care of her in the last couple months of her life. She had young children, including a 1-year-old. I was the person with her when she died. I had already become a dharma student, and a lot of my fear had already dissipated. I had a very transformative experience around her death.

I studied with several different healers, and learned ways of increasing and moving my energy to help people with my hands. I had a visitation from my mother when she was in the coronary care unit after a heart attack. And mind you, this notion of

“healing” was totally foreign to her, the whole thing, she was completely not a person who lived in this area. But the third night she was in the hospital, she woke me from a deep sleep in the middle of the night. She asked me to work on her in a way that would balance her. I sat up in bed and I did a distant healing for her, visualizing her body and balancing all of her chakras. I sat and did that for about a half an hour from a distance, and then lay down and went back to sleep.

Then the following morning we went to the hospital. I got to her room and I asked the nurse if I could be alone with her for awhile. I did the same set of maneuvers with my hands on her body and then sat with her and did a Buddhist meditation, visualizing purification for her. Then I went back out into the waiting room, and just a few minutes later we heard on the P.A. system that they were calling a code Blue on her, and everyone ran. She was dying, and they tried to revive her, but she died.

I had an amazing experience then, because we went back into the room about half an hour after she died, and they had taken all the tubes and wires out and just put a blanket over her. She lay on the pillow, and her poor face, which for the previous 30 years in my memory had been pinched and pained and very strained and tortured, her face looked 20 to 30 years younger lying on the pillow. There were no lines on her face, and she was all plumped out in all the pinched places. She had a little smile on the corners of her mouth. She looked radiant and peaceful and beautiful. I really noticed that she had let go. She had beckoned me to help her, and she had let go of something. Here she was, in her full essence. Her mind had not left her body yet. She was there, and I could see her how she really was. That was a very, very informative experience for me. In retrospect, I called that the Year of the Death. I had four experiences with four very

close, important people to me, during which time somehow I lost my fear of death. To a degree, to a degree.

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One day out in the wilderness all by myself, I took some peyote. I had been saving it for a long time and I hadn't taken a psychedelic for quite a few years. For some reason, I chose a particular day to do it that I was by myself. I think that I probably took too large of a dose, and I had a deeply profound experience where actually I was flattened. I was completely flattened. I was lying on the ground for probably 8 hours, unable to move. I couldn't move a millimeter to the left or to the right, or I felt like I would go over the edge, that I would either be deathly sick, crazy or annihilated. I just felt myself holding on with a thread somehow to this body. And in those 8 hours, I had a variety of experiences.

One of the experiences was that since it was so intensely pleasurable to go mind traveling and time traveling, while I was lying there immobile all those hours, I just let my mind go. I let it go and go and go and go, and I began to see that I was way far away from this body. I could feel an extremely fine gossamer thread that was attached to this body. The mind went further and further and further and further and further away. There was a moment in which I had the realization that I could just keep on going, and that I could let go of that thread and cause myself to die. I could do that, and it felt wonderful. There was nothing scary about it at all. It felt wonderful that I saw how tenuous the hold on this embodiment was, and that I had complete power in this state of mind over letting go of it.

I then understood the meaning of the will to live. And I stopped myself from going higher, farther, more in to the light, because I realized it wasn't time for me to let

go. I started reeling myself back in and becoming less gossamer, less ethereal, less sheer, more dense, closer to my body, closer, closer, closer. It was like atomic particles. I got out to the level of atomic particles, and then feeling myself pulling them back in, to come back to reside in the body. That was a very, very amazing realization, that I had that control on the most subtle level. Then the hours kept going by. I could feel the sun shifting. I had, on the bottom of my body, after I was able to get up after 8 hours, all these imprints in me from the leaves of the cork oak tree. And on my back I had a really weird sunburn from whatever position the sun took all those hours.

I had three more experiences during those 8 hours. In the first, I felt the body on the ground, suddenly lying in an open grave. I felt myself in that position on my stomach, lying, suddenly descending. The air got cooler. I was in a shaft. I was in a grave. It was long. I was lying in that grave, and I could feel the coldness in the bottom of the dirt against me and on my cheek. I couldn't feel the oak leaves anymore; I felt the cold grave. I knew there was a ring of people around at the top, and then I began to feel thuds of cold dirt on my back. They were shoveling the dirt on me, and I could actually feel it covering me up. It felt really nice. As it started covering all of my body, it turned from cold into warm. I started feeling like I was in a cocoon. It was an intensely pleasurable experience. I felt the fear of it initially; then the strangeness, the coldness of it started dissipating, and I began to merge with the earth and become one with the earth. I was in a time warp of some kind, or a time speed-up, I don't know what it was. But I felt then going from cold to warm to covered.

I began to feel this body disintegrating. Decomposing. Composting. I began to feel the body become part of the earth and the earth become part of the body. It felt really, really nice. It was a disintegration process and a merging. I could actually even

start to feel all the little sow bugs and the worms crawling through me. I mean, one of my roots of terror from a little girl was that song, [singing] *Did you ever think when a hearse went by that someday soon when you may die and I'll wrap you up in a big white shirt and bury you six feet under the dirt and you'll rot, rot, rot, and the worms crawl in and the worms crawl out and the worms go crawling all about, and you'll rot, rot, rot six feet under the earth.* I had that song which we used to sing as children in my psyche I'm sure. I could feel the worms crawling in and out and it tickled. And the little bugs, I could see every line on the sow bugs' backs. I mean, I was there. It was very nice. I just decomposed and became compost. It was all very graceful and comfortable and fine and okay.

Then the scene segued very slowly over these hours into right there, where I was, at that campsite. There was a little fire ring, an opening, and there were some logs, and I started to experienced this compostedness taking the form of this log. It had gone through whatever it had gone through—the dirt and the seeds turning into a tree, then the tree falling and turning into a log. Many lifetimes later, here was this decomposing log with knot holes in it, moss and little openings and places where it was rotted away. There was organic matter, and there were things growing in it. I experienced myself as this log which looked inert, but it was supporting all this life, all these different lives. Moss and insects and termites. It was giving life. I totally experienced the cycle of life and death and rebirth, and how the body is all compost and we're all compost. It's outside of time and organicity of time earth and nature, and the part of nature that we are. It was totally body. This part was totally body.

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I got very interested in AIDS, and then very interested in death and dying. That began my years of hospice, with a strong foundation of everything that I've told you, and strong practice. I was able to be very effective at working with dying people, and very creative at replenishing myself. I feel like it was a most productive period of my work with people. And definitely I learned much more than I gave, from the experience of working with dying.

My interest in death and dying continues. I feel that in losing a lot of my fear of dying and in integrating Buddhist teachings on emptiness and impermanence, that there's nothing that has solid existence on its own. It is always a continuous movement of energy moving from one form into the next, constantly changing. As I am more and more able to identify with that and replace my ego's grasping onto this body as being me, I am more able to work with death. To be less frightened of it and to accept the karmic circumstances of each lifetime, which dictates the age of one's death and the circumstances of one's death. Everything now at this moment in my life is more and more weaving together. I can see on the relative level the reason for each event or groups of events, because it led to the next level and the next, all the way to the ultimate.

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This experience that I have of intense joy, spaciousness, knowing what to do, expandedness, expansiveness—I feel like it's a natural knowing, an archaic knowledge, or a cellular wisdom. Or maybe it's *the* wisdom, or the wisdom that realizes the emptiness, the lack of solidity of anything, everything. But it's a particle, atomic-based thing that maybe even resides in the DNA and in the genetic code. Or it's a spark of

human life, energy, love, or call it whatever you will. It's the life force. And I think it exists in each alive cell. It's the stuff of life.

I think cellular knowledge exists in each cell. A nerve cell has the knowledge of reproducing another nerve cell. I've had deep tissue work, meditative experiences, experiences in water, drug experiences—many different avenues lead me to the same experience of having a cellular memory arise. It's given me a firm conviction from personal experience that there's a cellular memory. I do believe from my experience of doing Tibetan Buddhist practices that when the root of a particular emotion is cut, that the memory of the memory of the memory gets cut. And you're left with spacious enlightened mind in that arena.

The body is my vehicle of experience. The body, or the mind disembodied, is the kite flying free out there in nirvana. Liberation. Formlessness, weightlessness. The body drags us down and makes us heavy, brings us to the earth. We're connected by gravity. You need to be grounded. You don't want to fly or float away because perhaps you can be more effective if you're embodied. I don't know, I'm not quite there yet. I understand that all the disembodiment, all the spiritually evolved and enlightened ones, that that energy force is out there for us to call upon. I'm not wise enough yet to really know that it doesn't make any difference if you're embodied or not embodied. I'm still too attached to this body, but I'm getting glimmers.

Rose

Rose is a 62-year-old Jewish woman who is a teacher in the Sufi Order of the West, and also a teacher in the Diamond Logos work. She lives in Oakland, California.

I live in my body. I am very present in my body. I've learned that over a long period of time. I think as a young child and as a young adult that I was not as embodied as I am now. I essentially believe that we bring spirit into matter, and that it's the body that is the final product of enlightenment. So that the body becomes spacious, the body becomes clear, and that it becomes filled with light. I think there used to be a part of me that wanted freedom from embodiment. And at this point I see that one can be free and embodied. That if we were not going to be embodied, there would be no point to incarnating. There must be something that we bring into matter, into life.

It is part of what the ancient alchemists talked about. That the process is one of separating spirit from matter. Purifying, if you will. And then bringing spirit back into matter in a much more conscious way. That's an ongoing process, it's actually a life process. I think that as we do that we begin to have experiences of our bodies differently. The more we are able to let go, the less we feel constraints and constrictions, tightnesses, and the more we're able to sort of move freely, move comfortably. It seems to me that my body responds differently, looks differently, has more light that seems to be reflected in it.

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My primary spiritual path is a Sufi one. I'm in Universal Sufism, an initiate in the Sufi Order of the West. Pir Vilayat is my teacher, and I'm a teacher in that tradition. We talk about the body as a temple, and I started talking about it as what we are working to become. The word become flesh kind of thing. I think that really speaks to an influx of a

feminine consciousness in the work and in the healing work. I really believe Hazrat Inayat Khan is talking about embodied spirituality that comes and lives in this world.

The Sufi healing work is really on the body. It's what we call the South Pole of the experience. It works with balancing the elements within the physical body. We work with prayer and touch, but it's not intrusive. It's really when we touch someone, it's to help orient them to what's going on in their body. I've worked with a number of people on spiritual paths, and several of them have said, "You know, I don't think I've lived in my body very much." So the work itself draws their attention to the fact that they're not living in their bodies. When I sit with somebody in meditation I process through my body, which is how I process things, what's going on in their bodies.

The healing work is also about being present in what we call five bodies or five domains, one of them being the physical body. The others are emotional, mental, moral, which we define as a connectivity with ourselves and with others, and then spirit. Those in essence are one. It just depends on how you look at them. They develop in different ways at different levels. But ultimately we bring consciousness into ourselves, into the world, and into matter. And that seems to happen over time. For me it's involved releasing what's in the cells of my body, opening into a kind of spaciousness.

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When I got pregnant I started to really tune into my body. It was the beginning of living in my body. Those of us who give birth to children and are awake for the experience, and most women are these days, it's awesome. There's a release of energy when a baby is born that certainly is orgasmic. Not in a sexual sense, but there is an opening. I remember they gave me a sleeping pill when I couldn't fall asleep. And it didn't work. I had just had probably the most awesome experience of my life.

You know, the French refer to orgasm as *la petite morte*. It is the little death. It's any place where we release our sense of separate boundaries and our images of ourselves. It leaves us with an opening, and a kind of death. The Sufi motto, if you will, is *Die before death, and resurrect now*. That death is the letting go of an image of oneself that we take to be ourselves.

30 years ago I had a near death experience and I opened into this incredible space of light. It knocked the pins out of my whole belief system. There was an appreciation of life, and of my body, that came from that experience. I was really teetering on the edge; I had a pulmonary infarct. I was in the hospital for about a month. Eventually it was my body that made the choice to live. There was something about coming into my body so that it felt like I was in a new body, that somehow this was a second lifetime in this body—just appreciating being alive, being here, and the absolute thread that we all hang from.

Then a number of years later I did work with Emily Conrad in Continuum. I was in L.A. at the time. I went three times a week, and it was a lot of work with the cellular structure of the body. And it is Emily's belief that the cells have consciousness. You realize your boundaries are really structures in your mind. You can go through all of the layers of evolution in your own body. It's a mixture of movement and meditation, and it all happens in the body. That work was major movement, and major seeing that the body is movement.

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I think a major turning point was, I had breast cancer 8 years ago. There were incredible openings that came with that. What happened in the course of the cancer was I really realized that my body and my body image were two different things. I realized that

my body had more movement and shifted and changed on a regular daily basis.

Something of that whole continuing experience really deepened. I make jokes about the body of resurrection was put back together by a plastic surgeon. There was something about the body, what we're able to do with the body, and what the body tells us when it becomes ill that is a pathway to major opening. I think all illness is a doorway into a transformation process.

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I start my morning meditation becoming present in my physical body, and then in all of my bodies, and seeing how they line up. Then I do practice. Somebody recently said to me, you just keep getting younger every year. I think there is something of the relaxation, of the not taking on an image of aging. I think it's that aliveness that begins to enter the body, to stay in the body, and it becomes magnetic not from youth but from consciousness. It's a different kind of magnetism. My teacher talks about the difference between the magnetism of the body and the magnetism of the soul. At 85, women still find him attractive.

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I've had some very powerful spiritual experiences with partners in sexuality, going through realms of light as we opened. And there is a place of union. It sort of got to the place of understanding with marriage, God made a sacrament. There's a saying by Inayat Khan that in the union of two loving hearts is the unity of God. If we begin to open—it's what tantra's been teaching for the millennia, but we don't generally understand in this culture and in most spiritual paths—we are able to have an experience of union, and of letting go of our separate isolated consciousness by merging with

another human being. In this culture, that's really the only place where people in general are aware of letting go of ego boundaries.

The fact that we can open and enter into another human being's experience, or energetic field, is really quite extraordinary. And the more we let go, or the more we have flexible boundaries, the more we are able to do that. As you move along in meditation, you open, you merge with something larger. I think in sex we sort of merge with somebody in a very finite way, and it opens into a very rich, open way. It's something of the substance of our being in love, and we are made of that. It is my belief that we open into something much larger. It really is a place where all of the religions have made sexuality something sacred, something of the sacrament if we want to use the Christian terminology. And it is a sacrament, because that union is a reflection of a kind of divine union. It's an opening in love, and a joining in love.

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The sense of 'I' is a locus of consciousness in the body. But it's not who I am. Just as my emotional state is not who I am, just as my thoughts or beliefs in any given time is not who I am. But there is a locus of consciousness on all of those levels. And it's probably heart-centered. I think that just has to do with the fact that I walk a path of the heart.

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I live my life one day at a time. I'm very conscious of death in a very real way. My hope is that I die consciously, and I live with the fact that I could go any day. I think the consciousness of death has us live differently. I believe it's a transition, and it's one of many that I've made. It's one that lets go of a body that's probably, by the time I go, hopefully will have outlived its usefulness. But I'm also a cancer survivor. So I know,

you never know is what it boils down to. Those people in the World Trade Center went to work. They were not sick.

We really only have the present. There's only today. So that I live today as consciously as I can. I don't know if I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning. I don't know if I'm going to have a car accident. I don't know if there's going to be a disease process that comes back. And I'm not interested in thinking about those things. At some point when I'm finished with what I came onto this Earth to do, I will leave this body. I will transition into another level of consciousness. That's why we practice in releasing images and releasing self images. It's to not identify in the way we normally identify with our bodies. I can be in my body, I can enjoy my body, I can love my body, and I can leave my body and not cling to it when the time comes. And I would like to do that as consciously as possible.

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I think there needs to be a piece of, "I am not the body," because this culture is so materialistic that we define people by their bodies. Particularly we define women by their bodies. I think part of a woman's aging process has to do with recognizing that she's not decorative. She's not just her body. The identity to some degree shifts more to spiritual. But I think it's really important to also own the aging body.

I do wear makeup and I do get my hair colored. I make choices based on what I find aesthetically pleasing to me, but I'm not trying to turn the clock back. I'm not trying for my body to be any different from how it is. It's healthy, it works, it goes to a gym every day and reads murder mysteries to stay on treadmills. I like to eat, I like to sleep well, and I like to get a massage. I enjoy all of the sins of the flesh, if you will. But I also know it's not what's essential for my being in my life.

Maya

Maya is a 54-year-old African priestess of Oshun (Love goddess) who is African and Native-American. She has one child by birth and numerous other children whom she regards as daughters and sons. Maya is an author, and she teaches classes on African goddesses and shamanism. She lives in Richmond, California.

To go to the heart of your question about embodiment, it probably makes sense to make a distinction between what I was taught as a Catholic, and what I learned as a Yoruba priestess. As a Catholic, one is sent the message that the body is evil, that spirit is best removed from the body, that sexuality should be suppressed, whispered about—somehow the antithesis of spirituality. Nature is something to be conquered somehow, or overcome. Virginity unto death seems to be some kind of virtue. That is so far away from the African point of view that it is amazing.

Sexuality and procreation—our priesthood does not and would not require a lifetime of celibacy. You have a period, you have periods of holding your energy to yourself. You go through an initiation and there's 3 months of celibacy, or 41 days of celibacy, or 7 days of being all in white clothes. Different things to reinforce. But the idea of a lifetime of celibacy does not appeal at all. No, no, no, we really don't do that.

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Children and birthing is so revered by us that *not* birthing becomes a problem. We don't really have sins. We have taboos. We have what we consider to be imbalances, demonstrations of underdeveloped character. Developing character—practice in iwapele—is very important for working to develop your character while you're here on Earth. Children are considered to be our greatest wealth. And so if one is not producing children, then one must be caring for children. The children that are born from me are my

children. But the children of the woman in the next hut are also my children, and the children across the street are also my children. Birthing is highly valued, and sometimes for a couple who have no children, there would be a sort of sadness that can only be repaired by a strong relationship to other children, a strong relationship to birthing somehow.

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One of our primary forms of worship is dance. We have complicated rhythms, incredibly beautiful songs, and dances that we do that are a recreation of the attitude and action of the natural force. So when we dance for Yemaya, the goddess of the ocean, the dance looks like we are walking in sand, making ocean waves and sounds, behaving like creatures who would be in the ocean. We want to awaken in ourselves that connection to our marine beginning. When we dance for the Lord of Thunder, we are reaching up and pulling lightning out of the sky, passing that energy through our bodies, raising adrenaline. Each one of the dances pulls on the energy of that natural force, and reenacts adventures from the mythology of those deities. Ultimately, the purpose of the dance is to send out a prayer that is heard and felt by that natural force, so that that force is awakened in your body. That force enters into you.

In the language of the tradition, you could say that I think of myself as a horse that the spirit rides. We would say, “Well, Maya was dancing at the ceremony the other night, and Oshun mounted her.” So the Goddess got on me and rode me like a horse, and came into me. And then I go into a deep state of trance possession, and that force speaks through my consciousness using my body to show, to demonstrate. We believe that we literally, physically embody the spirit in our flesh, for a period of time, so that spirits can speak through our consciousness and our body. When the task is done, it leaves, and we

return to mundane reality. So the body becomes very important in that regard. We really have a good relationship to nature, a good relationship to the body.

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It just so happens that my goddess, Oshun, the goddess of the sweet river, is the goddess of love, art, and sexuality. Now, one of the battles that goes on, and it's going on right now, is, if you talk to me—a priestess of that goddess, one who embodies her, and who studies different traditions, and also has a feminist perspective—I will tell you that she represents the quality of attraction in nature. She's the reason the birds and the bees dare to dance for each other, or why the flowers grow. She is responsible for you looking at somebody and deciding that you love them. She is at the center of your sexual arousal. She is generous with this, everybody is entitled to it. But you'll get some masculinist who will tell you that Oshun is what they call La Puta Santa—the whore saint, that she is the great whore. And that is because they can't deal with her. So sexuality, knowing about sexuality, healing sexual dysfunction, is my area of expertise. It is what I came to Earth to do. And those of us who are children of Oshun, among ourselves, we talk about what it feels like to be like that from the inside.

The fact that that is often misunderstood and not appreciated is a hard thing for us to deal with sometimes. The folklore is full of times when this particular goddess was not appreciated or was not understood. And she left Earth, and all the rivers dried up, all the flowers died, and the people couldn't stand their existence because there was no joy.

So you're emitting some kind of energy that attracts people, and you're not even aware of it. I've been told by others that I'm an unconscious flirt. I've been told that I'm a terrible flirt. To me, I'm just talking. I'm joking, or I'm just doing what I'm doing. If I'm consciously flirting with you, I figure you're going to know because I'm going to tell

you. But other people say, “Your mannerisms are flirtatious, your eyes are flirtatious, your voice is seductive, your movement is doing this.” And to me, I’m cleaning the house, but they swear I’m swiveling my hips in their face. That’s Oshun.

One of the things it took me awhile to get is that this Venus way of being, I’ve heard people say, “Oh, those children of Oshun, they’re so blessed. God just gives them everything. They just flitter about laughing, dancing, singing, joking, and making love. Their lives are so easy.” That is not true. People don’t see how much work you do. They have no sense of the pain that you are carrying, because you always look like you’re so happy and everything is so wonderful. I’ve had to tell some folks, “When you are in your bed asleep at night, I’m laying up trying to figure out how to take care of a problem.” *In the middle of the night* [singing]. That’s one of the songs. *In the middle of the night, in the middle of the night, I work the medicine, I work the magic. In the middle of the night.* When others are asleep, we are laying up trying to figure out what to do about this and that. You see.

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What happens to you as a child of Oshun, is you often find yourself caught in what I call an alchemical interaction. So that as I am talking to you, I’m being affected by you. It’s not just up in my head. I am feeling it in my body, and my body is talking to me about this interaction. My body does not lie to me about what’s going on. I will have a skin sensation that is holding the truth. You could say my intuition is physicalized. I walk in a room and my skin will tell me the subtext of what’s being said by people’s heads. The conscious mind is saying what is socially correct, or what is required, and my skin hears the whispering underneath. Which is very difficult sometimes. I’ve had situations

where I've just wanted to scream and say, "We can't keep doing this! This is false! This does not feel right! You're pretending!"

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One of the problems of being a child of Oshun, is you can't really tell where you end and the other person begins. Right now I'm all up in your aura, and you're all up in mine. You know what I'm saying? And that extends a sort of awareness that makes it hard. Probably the best way to explain it to you would be to give you an example of what happens to me.

I was in Hawaii with some other women, and I looked up. We were at a place called Akaka Falls. Most of the time if you show me a waterfall coming down between two mountains, what I see is my own vagina. I really do. I really do. On this day, I looked up and I saw the waterfall, and I said, "I've got to go to the source of the waterfall." Which means going up a mountain. So we're going up a mountain trail, and we're going up, up, up, up, and soon I'm looking down on the canopy of the forest. Now thank goodness one of the other women who was with me is also a priestess of Oshun, and somebody who's been my best friend for years. But I got it in my head that I needed to do an adagio onto the canopy of the forest. I saw myself spreading myself, smearing myself across the canopy. And I looked at it, and screamed. My friend grabbed me, she turned me to this tree, and put my arms around the tree. She just held me there while I screamed. When I stopped screaming, I pulled back. There was green lichen running down my body. Now that's what I call my *eco-erotic episodes*.

Stuff like that happens to me all the time. And it's very dangerous, because I couldn't separate me from the green. I wanted to be part of that green. I could have leapt to my death if somebody who knew me was not there. So I really have to ground

sometimes and say, “What is this feeling? What is this? How do I really handle this? No, don’t leap. You want to be one with the green, but leaping into the canopy of the forest is not the answer. Smear some lichen on yourself. That’ll work. Go put on a green dress, paint your face, run out, go hug a tree, make love to somebody.” Really. It’s maddening.

Valerie Vener

Valerie is a 42-year-old Caucasian woman and spiritual teacher. At the age of 20, Valerie had a profound near-death experience during a house fire. It was during this experience that she met her spiritual master, Da Free John, whom she had not known of prior to this experience. Valerie considers this meeting with Da to be a catalyst for her full awakening that occurred 10 years later. Valerie is a dynamic and animated embodiment of truth. She has a community of students she works with in Oakland, California, where she also lives. Valerie travels extensively, teaching with several of her awakened students. Valerie has one 17-year-old son.

I started this lifetime experiencing the body very freely, very aware that I was energy, everything was energy, and that my job was to open as energy in energy. It was very simple, there wasn't any mind about it. I would stand on my head, put my feet in a full lotus, stand in the corner on one foot with my hands above my head, because it felt really good, and I could feel the energies moving as me. Then as I moved on in life, it became very apparent that nobody else around me was seeing or feeling things in this way, and so I assumed that I was crazy in some kind of fashion. I would mention it to my father, for example, "Look at that lovely light around Mom." He'd say, "Oh, you're so creative."

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Then when I was 20, I was burned in a house fire, and I died for 7 minutes. When they revived me, it was again very apparent that what this body was, was an essential conduit for energy. Energy was pumped in and as me, and then released in and as me. So again, from that point on, with much more mind involved, much more consciousness involved, I would practice ways of being that would increase my capacity to hold the

energy that I was, or to resonate, really, as freely as I could resonate. So the body, incredibly important for me—much more important than any practices that would try to transcend the body. Transcendence for me is actually allowing the body to be free without interference. So it's an extraordinary barometer for me, the body. How I am being conducted, energetically, and how that conductivity is then in relationship to other forms of light via the body became just so exquisite to me. It became very clear to me that that dying or death feeling in my body is essential self transcendence, to allow this energy that I am to transfigure this form, to increase its capacity over and over again.

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I am the body, I am as the body, and as I am the body, it becomes such a teacher in terms of whether or not I am rejecting myself or opening to myself, in all my forms. When I am no longer the body, I am something else. When I died, I had the classic near death experience where you see the body lying on the floor, and at that point it became very apparent that I was more than what I thought I was. But I, the one that lives as this body, was still the consciousness that was looking at the body. Each state of surrender that continued to happen in that death process would bring about a greater sense of dissolution of what I thought I was in any given moment, and a simultaneous expansion of who I knew I was. So there would be this dissolution-expansion process that happened—not just with letting go of the body, but with letting go of each state of consciousness as I passed through the mandala of who I am.

As I am the body, I am the body. Many of my lifetimes were spent intuiting that I was a consciousness that somehow felt trapped within the body. This lifetime is very clear—not trapped; I'm in no way removed from myself or absent as I am in this conduit, but as I am being animated, I am that. There's no longer a separation for me between

what lives me and what I am being lived as. That was very different for me. In past lifetimes, like I said, I would very much try to get to a state of consciousness or a state of being that I somehow knew was greater than the body. This lifetime the body is the greatest manifestation of what I currently am, as I am. So there's no longer any kind of feeling of being trapped, or isolated within, or any place I have to go to find myself. I am as I stand, in any form. As soon as I am no longer living as the body, then I am as I am living in that moment. I never change the essential I that I am in relationship to, but each form that I take, I am that.

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I met my spiritual master in that near death experience. It became very obvious to me in that experience that I am my spiritual master. It was very clear that when I came back into the body, that I wanted to recall myself, fully remember myself, which again was different. Prior to that, when I would relax in the body, I would fall into a sense of suffering. I could tell that when I relaxed, I was somehow suffering. So I would do everything possible in the universe to not relax. After the fire when I relaxed, I fell into God as God. From after the fire, because I was so absolutely convinced cellularly that when I relaxed, I fell into who I really am, or I fell into God, then relaxation or self transcendence became very pleasurable for me. So, when I say I started doing practices, really everything I did—from sexuality to dancing to writing to painting—whatever I did, I would sit in my stillness, allow the wave of the breath, sit in my stillness, allow the wave of my breath, and that informed me. It informed me so delightfully that I could trust that practice beyond anything else, and I began transfiguring and transforming through that practice.

So my life took on what looks like kind of a traditional spiritual practice, but I have to say, all of those practices were guided by this one essential practice of self-transcendence. I noticed in doing this practice, or in maybe an undoing of practice, that everything, everything was this combination of stillness and wave, from when I would watch the ocean, to cycles of the moon, to my own cycles in my female body, to conversation, to relationship, to birth, to death, the blades of grass growing. Everything was moving in these cycles of stillness, wave, waves within the stillness, stillness within the waves.

Prior to the fire, I used to breathe like this [strong breathing], pulling the air into my body, very little stillness at the top and bottom of the breath. It was as if I thought I was breathing myself, that I had to pump energy into my body or I would die. After the fire I would allow myself to fall very deeply into the stillness, after I would exhale, and I would just wait. And I would notice, obviously, that I was being breathed. This body was a conduit for breath. This attempt to breathe myself was actually rejecting myself. It was so insidious; it seemed like everywhere I looked 99.9% of the human beings were in this state of consciousness where they accidentally were trying to breathe themselves, rather than allowing that sacrifice of being breathed to occur with the least amount of interference.

When I relax as that sacrifice, when I open, and allow that to happen, energy finds more room. It's never satisfied with a small state; it always is trying to find more area to fill, more expansion to be had. So this seeming skin-like tissue is all about that. I was just at a birth. A good friend of mine gave birth a couple of days ago, and birth is such an exquisite example of this, in its most gross or bodily form. She was contracted and released, contracted and released, all the time having to find more room to expand, more

room to expand, and that's not always comfortable. The same is true in just living as the physical body. I am always wanting more room in myself, and so that is the body.

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A lot of the changes I would consider are internal, or unseeable changes. This body experiences energy quite profoundly. So it would have huge kundalini experiences. After the fire I would sit in meditation and simply breathe and visualize the master I had met as my own heart. Then, say for example, my head would spin back and forth really really fast and the breath would do what they call pranayama movements, and then my body would bounce on the bed, and then, I would think, Wow, I'm a yogini, I'm thrilled. And then somehow, again returning to this practice of simply stillness and breath, I would hear my own voice say, Yeah, you're not a yogini, you're full of shit, and the shit wants to be released in the body. So simply sit still, humble your ass, and allow yourself to be, and the secretions to leave, the toxins to leave.

So very often I would be going through the transformations of the physical body. Again, I'm going to go back to the fire, because it's such a beautiful archetype for me. It was 1200 to 1700 degrees in the house that I was in, and I was conscious for about 15 minutes before I died. That's supposed to be impossible to live in that environment. The body, of course, was transformed; it was melted. I lost 9 pounds of fat in that 15 minutes of time. The skin was burned in places, on my arms particularly. There was no skin left in a lot of places. All of the skin was charcoal black and the hair was shriveled, the eye lashes were gone, and so there was a very obvious transformation of the body.

Then, when I came back into the body, there was a 2 to 5 year period of recovery from that, where I'd watch the skin grow back, and I'd watch the scars form, and then I'd have to stretch the skin so the scars could work. So the transformation of the body was so

obvious. You couldn't deny that it was constantly replenishing itself, constantly transcending itself to allow for the purpose of life, which is this stillness, breath, stillness, breath. After the body recovered from that, physically, it continued that transformation internally.

If I sit in Darshan with 30 people, my body looks like it's just sitting there, but it's going through these very uncomfortable sometimes, transfigurations of internal energy. The head feels like it's opening in various ways; the pelvic girdle opens; the feet breathe and expand; the hands move. It's constant. There's never a time when the body is not in some way either creating itself a new, or sloughing off the old, and each of those feels like transfigurations to me.

So again, in previous lifetimes, I practiced very much like this, this is supposed to be me in a past lifetime [Valerie shows me a photo of an Indian ascetic], according to some of my devotees. And so I would practice transcending the body, and not using the body, I would say, limiting the body to very easeful things. I would sit in meditation for hours and hours, and I would only eat raw foods or fluid foods, and no sexuality, very little conversation. I would not use the body very much, so that I could very easily transcend it, and allow the energy to flow freely, and that awakened the upper part of my nervous system very much. But this lifetime I wanted the whole thing to be awake; I wanted the whole thing to buzz. It seemed like a waste of time. If I'm a body, then be a body. And that's a much more heroic practice.

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My mother passed away when I was very young. She got ill when I was 4. She had breast cancer and went into remission until I was 12. Then she passed away when I was 14. I was very emotionally disturbed by that. There was this unbelievable need for

her, and the immediate realization that it was not going to be met—this need. My body, emotionally didn't want to need, so I had to try to close down my need. I didn't like the way that felt in the body, so I was trying to do things that would make me feel good, even though I was closed down.

So I participated in sexuality from a very young age. I wanted to be loved. I wanted to feel loved. I wanted to give love, and it also came very naturally to me. I knew that I had been male many lifetimes before. I could hold onto a lingam on a man's body and absolutely know that it was like a driving stick for running the energy in his body. And I could allow myself to just simply, again, relax in the stillness, and move energy through my body, through his body, through the lingam. So these were practices that were ancient that somehow I was remembering, but my heart was always in a severe kind of pain during sexuality. I didn't feel fully met. I didn't feel seen.

Then after the fire, because my body was so sensitive, it was so evident to me that sexuality and any human endeavor was about, again, moving this energy more freely. I started engaging in sexuality differently, and still I was extremely disappointed with sexuality. From most conventional standpoints, I had an excellent sexual experience, very free, very orgasmic. There weren't any problems in my body, and then at a certain point, I stopped being able to be clitorally orgasmic. I stopped being able to have sexuality, unless it was tantric, or energetic, and I became so obsessed with how, excuse the expression, fucked human sexuality was in terms of what I was seeing, that it became a major exploration for me. What was it? What did I have to do to find God through sexuality? It had a lot to do with retraining myself, and retraining everyone that I was sexual with to use the human instrument the way it was built. Most of us are engaged in sexuality in a way that actually dampens and hides, and really inevitably destroys the

energy during sexuality, throws it off the frontal plane, takes the stress that's involved with that contraction we're talking about and just blows it off, therefore making less of a channel for your own energy to move into the body.

I teach tantra. Essentially tantra is stillness, wave, stillness, wave. And I notice that people really don't know how to use the physical body in that simplicity, especially when it's heated up dramatically with sexual energy. What is tantra? Or what is a use of the human body to share energy, to actually increase the capacity for energy in the body? So you're not only a conduit for the energy that's living you, but you become a joint conduit for the energy that's living both people, as both people. That's just so dramatic. That means that your capacity has to increase. And mostly what we do in sexuality and relationship is we close down to protect ourselves, in ways that we don't even understand we're closing down, which actually diminishes the energy in our body.

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What I noticed in this stillness that I'm talking about was that there were two essential, three, I guess, essential energies that I was in relationship to—ohm, ma, and da. So I started exploring those three syllables in my own body, just noticing them. I would practice, for example, breathing them in and out of my body. In just doing that, I learned so much. Ma has to do with a circular or round quality, just like the vagina. Ma has something to do with pulling energy into my body. It has to do with the front of my body, the soft parts of my body, and again the front of my body is more circular than the back of my body. Ma energy has more to do with relational energy. It has very much to do with the open out quality, with a circular, or moving quality. It has to do with the energies moving, in terms of emotions and things like that in my body.

Da energy has much more to do with the back of my body, or the spinal line of my body. It has more to do with, I would say, containment, like my bones—very much like lingams. The bones contain this person; they also support this person. So da energy has more to do with support and containment than ma energy does. Then I started really noticing that da energy also has a lot to do with my direction in my life. Again, I always bring it to the most simple form. Da energy—very much linear energy. Ma energy—very much circular energy. And there we have a penis and a vagina, and the penis's function, or a linear pole function is very different from a circular function. It has a very different capacity; it's a very different way of receiving energy and giving energy.

All matter is made up of those two energies in this relationship. You can see, there's still stillness within those two energies, literally holding the two energies as they move. I thought this was exquisite. This is what I discovered in my own body as well. There's da energy, linear. There's ma energy, circular, working simultaneously in this sacrificial relationship to one another. When I discovered, therefore, the principles, or properties of these two energies, it became easier to understand sexuality.

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In all cases, I was there, the consciousness that I am is the same consciousness that you are. We are absolutely the same one. You may reference 'I' as Vipassana. I may reference 'I' as Valerie, but I am in absolute knowing clarity in my cellular structure that I am Vipassana, that I am Valerie. So where do I locate that in my body? I guess my point is when I'm not the body, I still locate that. But there are physical sensations in the body that are concurrent with self-transcendence that we all can notice. Essentially we come back to this very yearning, burning place in the right side of the heart. My heart has different locations. Like the physical heart is on the left, and that pumps the physical

system. And the psychic heart is in the middle, and that pumps the emotional and psychic system. And then the spiritual heart is on the right, and that pumps the spiritual system. So in some way, I'm just simply falling in my stillness, and allowing the wave of me to come and go freely.

Anna

Anna is a 40-year-old Caucasian woman who is a yoga teacher and massage therapist in Santa Cruz, California.

The association of who I am has shifted from being embodied, just a body, just being a local human being, to being. But there's an assumption even in the way that the question is phrased. There's the assumption that there is a spirit aware of itself that is embodied. That's part of the spiritual path, for me at least, to wake up to that truth, that there is a spirit who is different than the body—and who is also the same, also embodied and co-existent. Let that consciousness develop the muscle to both separate and converge. Beforehand, it's just unawareness. It's a bud that's not flowered. Yet it's a bud and it's great. It's being a bud. You have to be a bud. Then the awareness that I am different from my body comes and solidifies, and stabilizes over time. Just like the flower in time opens and stabilizes its state as that particular type of flower, whatever type of flower it is.

From my local standpoint, it's the waking up that I am a spirit in a body which comes first, as opposed to I am just a local me, an ego or a personality or a body. Then what happened for me is the spirit starts to reintegrate back into the body, and starts to re-associate with, I am this body. It's like living in my house. I'm not my house, but when I'm here, I'm coexisting. If you picked up the whole house, you'd be picking up me with it, and you'd move us both.

There's also the freedom, as I become more and more aware of who I am as a spirit, to move out of my house when I need to, to replenish and recharge, to gain perspective and have exclusively spiritual-in-consciousness experiences, unencumbered by physical sensations, needs, mental reverberations and the like. I think that has sometimes been judged by practitioners who are on the path, the part of leaving one's

body or dissociating, or doing a spiritual bypass of some sort. There is an ability that comes—that I believe is part of the work I’m here to do—to, in a healthy way, disembark, dissociate, or disengage temporarily in order to breathe as a spirit without the condensation that the body requires. And then learn to gracefully re-embody, with the awareness of what it is to be expanded. To be in a sustained expanded state is what meditation brings us. Then to be able to reintegrate that awareness into the local framework is the gift of God. It’s the gift of Life. It’s the gift that I’m working hard on, which is a joy and a challenge and a frustration, and ease, and it’s every mix that I can possibly imagine.

That reintegration, or that spiritual embodiment, which I believe is the core essence of your question and your research, is the work of “the Mother,” from my perspective. It’s the Father that instigates and breathes life into us, and it’s the Mother that says, “Okay gravity pulls you home, to where you are in your home, your local home, and let me know—she almost is at my feet—let me know what you are. Let me know what God breathed you as. Let me know, through as much detail as you can, and the stage your work is ready for. Let me know what it means to be a spirit in your body, in the body.” I feel my gift, both in bringing to people and in becoming more aware of in myself, is to learn to reintegrate with grace, ease, and love. With style. At first it’s just the concept of getting it, of having it happen.

Then the next stage in my opinion, in my experience, in my desire, in my commitment, and my enticement, is to get grounded with my personal style. And it’s spicy, and it’s threatening sometimes, to others and to myself. It’s unnerving, and it looks egocentric, but it’s not quite that. It is a spiritual gift which is both transcendent and really grounded and makes a difference in the local environment. And I’m having a blast.

It's like literally being born into this world. Just as the first stage of life is birthing our physical body, and the body and our personalities develop. Similarly, I feel like I've had a parallel experience as I've spiritually birthed into my life. I can only speak of where I am, and I can only dream of where I am yet to go, and listen to the wisdom of others. The spiritual rebirthing that has happened for me has been a lot about really embodying personally. Showing up here as a human being in God's breath. That's hard. At times that's been straining, just like birthing. There's been a weaving, with a lot of risk taking, exploration, and a lot of letting go of former rules—false rules.

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Artifacts and spirituality and spiritual demeanor has a certain meaning for me, but it has less and less as I embody more and more. I don't need to "be spiritual" to be spiritual. It's really at the phases that the realization is embodying. This phase has been for a while. But it's a marked phase that sheds any attachment to it looking a certain way, or being acknowledged for it being a certain way, or being known in a certain demeanor or fashion, or having attributes which look a certain way that I'm learning at this stage.

Because I feel I am internally guided, I just follow what's true for me—and I know that I'm connected, or hooked in, to the internal source that is much more rewarding than an external one—it gives me much more fortitude to withstand the huge gusts of wind that come from the outer world of expectations and presumptions and needs. Every time something comes from the world, I give it to Spirit, and Spirit gives it back to me, and infuses it with Itself, and says, "Go for it. Be a, whatever the role. Embody into that role and don't worry about your being spiritual, because I am with you, and that is what spirituality is. I am the truth, the being that Spirit is, that has embodied into you more and more."

The journey grounds me, further and further, spirit into my body, with the blessing that it needs its own spaciousness from time to time. Just like we need sleep in order to function during the day and be vital. Similarly, spirit soars out of the bounds of my local reference points, local consciousness, from time to time. I may be looked upon as, “Oh, she’s not grounded or she’s not here or she’s not whatever.” And the fact is I’m being cooperative, in a sense, giving way to the belief or understanding that spirit embodies the body. My body is actually in my spirit, not my spirit in my body. I could probably pinpoint where I predominantly experience my spirit in my body at a given moment out of awareness and physical sensitivity, as a reference point. But more fundamentally, my body is in a space of consciousness that my spirit is, that my spirit dwells in, and uses to express itself.

For me being a spirit in a body, being here, being a human being means that I’m in school. There’s a flow, which I feel is part of the kundalini process that awakens in a systematic way, and then descends. And after that there’s a lot more freedom. I feel that eventually the expanded state and the re-embodiment can happen much more fluidly than what the one by one, chakra by chakra, unlayering sheath by sheath initially enables you to do.

The challenges of re-embodiment have been letting go of false associations with what I really am, and then adopting them again. But as a player, rather than being confined by the role. It’s more like I am embodied into a role, and that means letting go of judgment completely, and of false inhibitions. Letting go of attachment completely but then reattaching. And that’s tricky. For me at least, the best advice is to [surrender to] the Mother, let the Divine, reattach you, place you, guide you. Trust it. I am sorry sometimes when I hear people speak ill of the ego. Then it will become ill! Bless it and honor it with

light and love and it will be a vehicle to express wisdom and compassion. Grow it as a child, and surrender it at appropriate times—to the Divine will. Then the shedding will occur naturally and well, and will be overseen carefully by the Great Intelligence lovingly guiding us each and all on our own individual paths.

Then the next thing is the Mother, which I call universal force of embodiment, the Mother, she rebirths. She is resheathing me, and it is unnerving. At the current state of waking up, I feel that the Mother or the Divine, or the aspect of Self which re-embodies, is re-stitching me. And it's very, very humbling to step into scenarios, environments, ways of being, aspects of myself, that are unfriendly or uninhabited as yet. Clueless. Ignorant. And naively, innocently walk into it anyway, with full faith that I am being worked with, and I am waking up under Her care. It's not like I am trying to have faith; it's more like faith has been imbued from the inside out. Because how Spirit gifts, by Its infinite intelligence and Its impeccable care, it is a saving grace. It is the saving grace, to have faith that the Mother is guiding me through the trials and tribulations, and the questions that I have, and the frustrations that I encounter.

There is a purpose for being here, and, for me, it is to become better dance partners. That's my spiritual path, to be a dance partner with Life. I am the follower in that sense, but as I follow I also learn to lead, because She is my dance teacher. She is my partner, and She leads. Then She also leads me with Her style, but by the style that I need. The style I am usually least developed in. She guides and coaches me, sometimes coaxes me out to practice and play in this way. That serves my further awakening. She helps us to awaken gently, though sometimes gives us great bursts. My lesson now is to learn about gentleness, softness, kindness, sincerity, sweetness. Really to let Spirit guide me, and to let that process unfold from within me, even cellularly. To trust whatever

instincts I have. Even if I made a 180 degree turn from sitting at the altar in prayer and communion for the entire day, unable to move from the candle's flame and from the inner gaze, which is just total bliss, to working out at the gym, and dancing to the hip hop music dance teacher's infamous cue. Spirit guides and expresses through curious and outrageous ways sometimes.

This embodiment is She. Just like the female holds the baby inside of her body, and she births. She is the Mother, She is what births, She is the element of embodiment. There is to me also the transcendent, non-genderized aspect of the Divine, but when you talk about embodying Spirit, you have to say She, in my opinion. In my work, I am also blessed by masculine guides, male aspects, male teachers, physical and non-physical. There is a very clear relationship with spirit level experiences and that is very sacred and special to me.

When I talk about the embodiment of my spirit, I feel like now I know I passed through the gateway of the Mother, by the experience of it. That came through the process of the kundalini awakening. What I believe is that kundalini awakening is about giving everyone the chance to wake up, while in the body, to their spiritual embodiment. It is a gift of Divine energy planted deep within every one of us, awaiting its time by cause or invitation, to arise. There is a lot of prewritten information within the experience which can give us a jump-start to the higher realms. Then the obligation or calling is to integrate it, and to personalize it, and in that way I feel we gift it back.

This is the answer to your question about what does it mean to me to be embodied. It means with my will and choice, being embodied into Life. To experience it and know it, and grow it. Use its energy well, with integrity. Using this playground, the leela. Using the rules and the physics of this world. Using my body and its movements,

perceptions and experiences. Using my life and its graces and wisdom. Using what physical life has to offer, using relationships to learn and progress in spirit. Not using in the sense of using and abusing, but using in the sense of manifesting, utilizing, embodying, willingly choosing. Using as in choosing. The Mother, to me, initially is about embodying into my karma and kind of getting the hang of things. Learning the school that I was just born into, which is encompassed by the school of Earth.



I work out intensely every single day. Over those years of my cultivation in spiritual realms, I really just didn't have the affinity for doing that type of rock and roll, go get'em, physical embodiment type of activities. I have no judgment over those. I have always been a health nut—vegetarian and vegan for over 20 years, working in holistic health, abiding by the principles of a natural way. That was a flame already lit for me. I think what Divine Will has done for me, what She has done, is align me to my more important aspects as they presented themselves naturally through Life's course. So when that was spiritual attention, that was a higher priority than working out at the gym, and I didn't want to lose focus on that. Having embodied further, bringing the higher into the lower, my attention now has more breadth. For me now, it's a deeper process of involvement and care through the sustained state of surrender which resides within, not so much calling to be known, but rather strengthening my path. But that may not be so much a kundalini aspect, as much as my own skills are developing as I'm learning to handle more things at a time. And to breathe outward more. I think a lot of fears and unconstructive thoughts or patterns get released, for me, in doing spiritual work. And that means, every time I release a fear or limiting belief, I have more room for something fun. Love is the birthing ground for fun. For creative projects. For something to be

experienced that is more in the level of manifestation, rather than recuperation or healing. From healing, to healed, to wellness, to “well, what do you want to do today?” to, “let’s have some fun, let’s create something!”

She cleanses, and the light will go wherever it needs to go to heal you next. And if your intention as a spirit is to really embody, it will go into your body. The energy of awakening, when She is in her individualized preeminent form, it’s just She. It’s an identity that moves through with consciousness and intelligence and purpose. The light of being, call it that. Then it starts to balance, and goes in whatever opposite directions it needs to reclaim and adjust the polarities. Cleansing, clearing, creating more space, releasing fears, and expanding the opportunities. Expanding the opportunities means, for me, releasing the attachment to old identities. And yet willingness to embody into them again at any moment, that’s the trick. There is a cellular cleansing. It’s a very palpable experience. It feels like a knitting between, an enmeshment, an intertwining between the etheric body, and when spirit finds that, it’s a done deal. Because then the physical body can be healed, as well as the energy bodies. The cells start to wash and cleanse. You can feel probings. It’s the energy of light literally probing through the brain, through the cellular structure, and the bones, muscles, organs—the flesh.

How can I work with Spirit, and allow further cleansing and further healing and further mastery? That’s where this path hopefully leads to for me. The aspect of the subtle body has been keenly interesting and quite compelling for me in my work. Although I love vitamins and herbs. I love fresh air and jogging, and I love physical statues and crystals and smells. And sweets and treats and tastes, and physical sensations. Though where it really is mystifying and intriguing, and fruitful for me, and takes a lot of sensitivity and stamina, is in the subtle realm. Literally, the nervous system registers and

feels subtleties. They are like sensations and awareness right in between the physical and the non-physical, or beyond physical rather.

I experience my nervous system starting to wake up, and my correlations, my correlatives between spirit and body, starting to get more familiar with each other at this next level. And this is a this is a huge part of my work right now—to make those associations between spirit and body. It's almost like pressing a keynote E on the piano and finding, "Oh, that one goes to middle range C. Great. Okay. If I press way up here, that's high E." The nervous system in this body, in my body, in this lifetime, is about making those correlations between my spiritual intention in the realm of possibility, to the physical plane in manifestation and action. It indicates a time of choice making. What I feel is a leading edge for me at this point is more at that transducer level—the subtle plucking of strings that enables me to really become my truer self. The aim is an integration of my greater self, the self that has had many many incarnations birthing and growing its wisdom further each time. That, I believe is intrinsically meaningful. And to take responsibility for, and to show up for the richness of this incarnation more and more and more. To hold it as inherently important, essentially worthwhile, and indeed a very special gift leads one to a daily experience of the sacred self.

It is fundamental, I feel, to continue to wake up to the realization and understanding that my soul incarnates so very many times, inconceivable to the limited mind. And that self has had all those many many bodies, and all those many many pieces of wisdom. The call is to puzzle piece together the themes and messages I continue to live, attract and express, and to transcend and restructure the basic clay of life's lessons into the gifts and enhancements I can return to it. To come "home" with some excellent material, having worked and warmed up the clay of my soul to surrender up to God,

Spirit, the Essential Divine. It is an utmost passive action. An active call of receptivity. A complete selfless donation of all that was selfishly attained. And the paradox of this is that the mundane is the most special of all sometimes, surrendering the smallness and insignificance to Spirit to remind us of true meaning and purpose. It is a replenishment. It is a gift. It is the content to which everything else becomes substratum and infrastructure. It is a sacred reordering based on true principles and life's infinite way of expressing, artistically weaving and winding them.

My soul, our souls, have character of its own, and uses the physical plane and this body and its travels to enhance and refine its character, much as we do as personalities, as human beings. We travel through lifetimes like our human selves travel through times of life. And we collect memories, some more significant than others. The grooves go deeper with certain people, certain attainments and accomplishments, certain collective karmas, and many other things as well, than with others that are more passing or incidental. These repetitive or deeper occasions and life passages keep getting refined in our consciousness until our souls are happy with their deeper attainment, which at that level is always an understanding, a level of awareness, which expresses adeptly through any circumstance. The material is understood, not just memorized. And while there is always room for the spirit of exploration, it's well past the exploratory stages. Thus, the soul develops a familiar pattern, or station shall we say, which consolidates with an individual's cultivation. Then we ascend to the next plane of existence where rules are different and issues more complex, and service expands to wider areas, people, and involves more aspects.

I described the subtle sensing of places, as one of the most significant focuses of my work, and to experience the subtlety of energies via the sensations through my

nervous system. The interface between the subtle body and my physical body gives me a sense of place, of where something is, of the energetic kundalini lotus petals. In that, for example, there is both a challenge and a joy in the opening of my crown chakra. I will say that through the kundalini awakening—a prominent path for me—I could sometimes sense my spirit as if hovering above my head. It's absolutely fascinating. Literally an out-of-body experience. And learning to move with that feeling of higher presence, integrate it and become it—that's the calling, to draw in the higher light and enhance ourselves.

From the ascending kundalini energy, the coiled spring that once stirred and awakened uncoils or throws upwards, it then descends and re-embodies. But there are all kinds of other aspects that go along with that which I'll speak to in a moment. So where is my spirit in my body? I like to believe that the ultimate destination for us as humans is to reside predominantly in the heart. That is where I want to mostly be. The head and the base converge in the heart, taking the wisdom from the higher planes with the experience and exploration of the lower realms and mixing them into the greatest and deepest understanding of compassion that we can have. The greatness of our higher selves humbled by the defenselessness and the egocentricity and child-like state of our lower selves. There is the endearingness that comes like a parental quality monitoring its child, watching it grow, enjoying its spontaneous surprises, but also making sure it neither falls off its course nor forgets its purpose.

How does sexuality fit in to the process of our spiritual growth? Sexuality is a strong power, both for the animal level of reproduction and desire, but also, and more importantly to the point of your question I think, as a propulsion to the higher self. It is like a motor energetically that brings us to realms we might not otherwise visit, experience, and know. It is an internal flight through which the soul ascends, through the

instigation of shared experience, especially if shared in intention and similar desire and energy. I feel sexuality is a gift also, and a special gift which calls for and deserves special care. Thoughts and intentions imprint into energy, give it its direction, and thus affect the direction of our flow in terms of sexual experience. Desiring or asking for a spiritual experience through a sexual expression calls forth forces beyond the lower chakras alone, and mixes in intelligence and intuition, wisdom and revelation into the mix of sensations and overall bliss.

After opening up into higher states, allowing my mind and body to experience bliss through methods of meditation and spiritual technique, the soul descends back into the body's reference points, down-stepping through the levels of awareness and consciousness and translating that through the mechanism of the nervous system. This dripping of amrita, a physical correlate to higher states distilled into essence, stimulates the centers of the brain which connect to the transcendent. The integration of these states and experiences, accessed through techniques in the realm of spirituality or through exalted moments in sexuality, is still based in the domain of the heart. That is the safest place to interpret higher experiences and stay grounded, and it is the most naturally ethical place to have lower desires find their right expression and peaceful resolution. Enlightenment involves both the ascent and the descent of soul light, and the expression or the living from truth wherever the soul has come from and wherever it is destined next to go.

There are things that make sense and are reasonable and good at some levels of life's expression and not at others. Not everything translates in parallel aspect by aspect. Exploring and then sifting and understanding is like the assimilation process in our

bodies. We digest experiences and points of view, higher and lower, to learn and grow our wisdom and service.

There is an experience for me as a human being of profound issues of life and death, of sex and discovery, of meaning and deeper inquiry which are still seen through the eyes of the ordinary self, just as who I simply am. Then there's another level of my understanding that comes from a beyond place, that comes from my expanded state. And has different parameters and different associations. I'm feeling like both are coming together in my world more at this time, and that is really a joy. It is also a challenge. It's like a mapping. It involves constant integrating and finding correlation points between my expanded state, or my spiritual realm, and my natural progression of human cycles, like the physical and emotional maturing as a woman. It's fascinating because I'm finding parallel desires and contrary desires. There are hints of being able to actually discern, at last, which energies are coming from where, why, and what is meaningful for me here and now. Learning to be human for me is to neither negate the realms of spirituality, nor to deny the experience of the ordinary and mundane. It's about the discovery and discernment which gives rise to the natural ordering of priorities and the incessant opportunity to make choices along the way. We get so many chances to choose. So many chances to refine. Life is so ultimately forgiving and generous, as we repeat lessons and refine our choices through time and close reflection.

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We're in a hologram. We're in something of a light show, I believe. We are behind the masks of our bodies, and behind the masks of our genders and our faces and our circumstances and our roles. I don't mean that in a negative sense, as in we're faking it. No, but I do believe we're adopting a role, and adopting a form. We're adopting a

format so to speak, to create an experience that we can then derive wisdom from. We create the scenario through the attraction of energies by the design of our intentions, and then we give it our best. Like a scene in a play gets set up, and then the last moment we step in to ad-lib, based on our best understanding of life and its forces. Then we assess and review, and go over parts we could do better, and next time, try to do just that. Ultimately it's what frees ourselves and each other from the entanglements without losing sight of the play we're in, that brings us to the highest satisfaction. Then Spirit, like a feather, with a graceful and caring touch, tenderly brushes against us and extracts in that one blessed moment the essence, the crème, the froth of our work thus far. The spiritual element draws in the wisdom from the scenario or cycle of life, and returns a depth and richness of meaning in even the simplest of moments. This wisdom is refined through infinite possibilities and re-enactments or reworks as many times and in as many ways as Spirit sees fit, sees needed, along with wisdom from higher guides, for the progression of its inner nature.

This is from my own experience of reflections on awakenings and deepenings. Initially there is a greater distinction between the concept of the body and the spirit, the ordinary and the profound. That's more important at the beginning of the journey, I believe, because it involves elements of differentiation, to establish the understandings of each, and the influences of each. But later there is more of a blending, still of distinct elements, but more of a confluence between aspects of life, higher and lower, spirit and body, truth and its expression, and they aren't so different, but rather more on the continuum of life, each waiting for their own stage of ripening to surrender to the beginning edges of the next layer. So to declare, "I am a spiritual person, I am this, and not that," is helpful perhaps, but ultimately that goes too, and is just "I am." And our

expression comes directly from that. That requires a lot of living and learning and shedding and claiming the truer truth, the essential self, that lies waiting deeply within. Waiting for re-identification, or re-association, or a renewed yes, with greater conviction and readiness and enthusiasm than even before.

How do I find meaning in the body? By continually discovering who I am, who directs the intentions that become thoughts that become feelings that become expressions and lead to lessons and reflections through time. Being curious, being artistic, desiring to be free and wise, to play, create, help and have fun are all ways that I bring meaning through my experience. There is never a dull moment in our lives, there is always an aliveness, even in the times of spiritual rest and recovery from more active phases, or in physical quietude. There is always Life probing just beneath the surface, wanting to know how it is for us each as individuals, like its children, just as much as we are curious about it, wanting to know how it all works and what it's all about. It is a leela, a relationship of play and inquiry . . . what if? . . . That requires a deep commitment to the process of life, and involves permission to explore and experiment, lose false control and superficial identifications, to redefine boundaries, stretching them, trying them for their elasticity.

There is a balance to be struck between the active element of doing and stepping into, taking responsibility for the work, and the passive element of surrender to the higher will, the divine aspect, the guiding wisdom that gives rise to the action. The spirit of life explores through us and wants us to grow with insight and intuition, and at the same time find strength and attainment through the freedom of exploration and through the grounded knowledge of experience. So it's a surrender and a taking hold. It's a saying "Yes, I will," and a giving up that will as the divine sees fit. This is not the giving up of one's personal boundaries, and personal power, to an individual, to another person, to the

horizontal experience of being in this world amongst others and equals. It is about the traveling through this plane to accrue these skills to then be delivered to the holy gates to pour forth the wisdom into Spirit's holy lap. Then the truer wisdom that returns is to be taken in with utmost receptivity and openness. That's the basic dance step: explore and experiment to learn and grow (takes courage and assertion), offer forth the work (takes honesty, surrender and willingness), receive and integrate (takes quietude, stillness, and a space of respect). It all takes strength, some through passivity and some through activity. It is exquisitely fruitful to continually refine and reapply this basic outlook to the inner and outer world. There is no end to the potential of creative enhancement, and the personal cultivation ensues from the divine commitment. It is inherently, a system with integrity which is brilliant, challenging and intrinsically rewarding. It reminds me of collage work—always options, various means of expression, and yet at some point you feel done, it's good. Enjoy and receive deeper meaning. Life is truly amazing, truly abundant and wise. I'm in such awe of Its ways. I can only imagine Its workings, and as I reflect on them with you, I also imagine a million more that are underneath the surface, assisting in the eventual (inevitable) blossomings awaiting to happen through each blessed moment of Spirit's stirrings.

The ebb and flow of Life therefore includes times of activity and outward expression as well as times of quietude and inner reflection. There is beauty in observing the natural flow, of Nature's (worldly and divine) tendency to create times for each, in incredible wisdom, with perfect timing. Sometimes there is an inner and outer synchronization, and sometimes there is a polarity which pulls us in opposite directions. There is a peak of expression, I believe, when one is outwardly expressing, drawn by the needs of and opportunities in the world, and at the same time, inwardly called to maintain

a presence of meditation, a sustained wisdom through which direction and intention is drawn. That is truly a person of power. Then the phases in between can synchronize in perfect timing with Spirit's needs, for expression through the physical plane, through the worldly format, including world events, collective dramas, and personal environments as well. It is a very sweet timeless ocean with a plentitude of truths and insights to seek and reflect, to enjoy and to talk about!

§

Later I discovered that I'd had what's classically called a spiritual emergence experience. I didn't read about it while it was occurring. I just wanted to allow it, I trusted Truth within me completely, and was just so internally curious about what it would be like, for me, authentically, personally, not through a prescribed notion of what others thought it was standardly like, whether they'd known those moments in themselves or not. I was so averse to prescribed notions and others' indications of how it is and what to do. Perhaps that's a personality trait, overlaid on top of an inner call. Whatever it was due to, I'm glad it was that way for me. The buried treasures within were astounding to explore and unfold.

Hours upon hours, days upon days, of altered states, of communing, of interpreting these riches and experiencing their greatness. It was inner phantasmagoria! Spirit's Disneyland, an inner vacation spot spa center with nooks and areas for exploration and discovery and learning and loving and utter unbelievable exquisite meltings. There was (and is, though quieter, and more mature maybe now) a loud and constant experience of divine relationship. I was an innocent child being pushed on the swing of life by a constant attendee, waiting for realizations to birth, and incubate, and mature and show themselves. Again, then, to offer forth. To deepen my service, which is

the hallmark of divine character building. To consolidate the Dharmic flow within, making sure there is room and energy and desire and sacredness for it. That is my purpose on earth, which I remember and forget and remember and forget, thus finding new pathways each time. It is a play, a challenging, curious, unusual, perfect play.

Feeling energy purified and moved from the inner realms is a very palpable experience for me. There are physical experiences of energy which is spiritual in nature. Kundalini awakenings are potentially very physical, as many people know from their experience. Though they can also be mental, emotional or mainly spiritual. It depends on what's best for the soul. The best way I can imagine to go through this blessed opportunity is to remain open to the experience and lean into Spirit's call. In other words, not to aggress it too hard from personal will, personal intention or desire. Be open to it, don't seek it too hard. There's another paradox . . . It does take everything from you, and working hard at it is part of the experience. But like with encountering a wild animal, in its turf, one needs to use utmost care to listen and observe before moving or directing one's course. There is a great sensitivity in the inner workings, and the intelligence can be subtle and strong, so big assertions to control that higher or subtler will can result in waves of energy and experience one may not be prepared for, or even capable of wielding at all. I was privy to these kinds of movements from within my inner experiences, and tried to navigate waves like a surfer—excited for the big ones, but knowing they're powerful and can be dangerous if the ego gets in control before the divine surrendered state links in first. It is a fascinating study to navigate waves of energy of spiritual intent. To try to discern them, integrate them, name them and then again, dance with them, or even select them upon further knowledge and expertise with their ways. That's really a more advanced dance partner, a co-creator with Life, with God, a responsible partner or

co-explorer. Expanded horizons and greater understandings are its rewards, I believe, I don't know . . . I'll tell you when I get there. (Life does present hints along the way though, foreshadowings . . .)

During some of these peak experiences, God would “speak” to me through the blades or grass. Somehow the way seemed simply paved. I had such extraordinary times of sustained high, it seemed, and I'd wished it would be, endless.

I felt as if God was breathing through me, that my breath was not my own, or not just my own. The motor didn't start here. The ignition was above, and the mechanism was experienced by me. It was revelatory in terms of who am I and what am I, even where am I. It was like my body's breath was redesignated to the higher self, and the lower self was learning to follow its intention. I, as lower, was absorbed by the new level I and was to come to understand more (at least a little bit more), and follow completely, in as many ways, as tightly, closely, clearly, succinctly as possible. Two close layers, weaving through life's warp and weft together, closer, empowered by the new forging of a bond, and understanding, to comprehend life through two vantage points, enhanced by the difference, strengthened by the union. There are infinite possibilities to explore in terms of where does breath originate. There is no one way. God and Nature have great diversity in common. That is one of their favorite marriage points, I believe.

Intention and instinct are very closely linked. Intention is conscious instinct, and instinct is organic intention, hard-wired so to speak. So breath is a combination mostly. A higher self thought birthed or grounded into the lower self through the body. Breath rises up and then settles down, like ocean water stirs things up from the bottom (that are ready, i.e., light enough to stir and move), then they fall back to the ground a little further along the sand, or they are brought up to the shore (to the higher self). The instinct of spiritual

breathing is the best meditation for daily living, as it can be practiced anywhere, and can cultivate thought, sensitivity, and stabilization at the same time. Then the songs of breath can be sung in harmony with more of Mother Nature's choir, the plant, mineral and animal kingdoms as well. That's trusted breathing; that's breath-communication. That's the basis of intuition, or at least a primary vehicle for its use and development. Dolphins are inherently masters of breath. Their lives depend on timing, flow, current, and thought to perceive the moment, and that's how they communicate with others and replenish themselves physically, energetically and spiritually, from what I basically understand of that species—very advanced breathing beings!

§

Sex is an energy that can be expressed and experienced in so many ways. There is the physical experience which involves sensations, and the energetic experience which can be a transportation to the higher light levels. Sex energy is just energy coming through the portal of the sexual center and thus is formatted in a certain way. It has engage, power, presence, interest, allure, mystery, pleasure, intensity, urgency, and drama! It also is spiritual if moved toward the higher centers. Similar traits translated into spiritual reference points, like connectiveness, union, laws of attraction, self-awareness, inquiry, respect, intentional movement and directing of flow, and storing of or replenishing energy (chi). It's all good. Nature's way, Spirit's way. They converge when sex and love come together. There is a trusted bond between two people when sex is spiritual that enables the whole experience to be a vehicle for higher awareness, for guides to transmit thought through the passageways of the intense energies, for realizations to occur, for visions and insights to become lucid. There are so many pleasures above the ones of the senses, but which can be enhanced by them, experienced

through them, and developed like a spiritual-physical skill. The nervous system, as I mentioned before, is a transducer, transferring and translating information through its electrical currents, i.e., sensations. There is such potential for evolution through the strong instinctive current involved in sexuality. And, it's one vehicle of so many for intensification of energetic experience. It's basic though, hardwired, multi-purpose, and common to all—a base instinct through which many wonderful treasures can be found. And they can be translated upward, to include, or not, the physical prompting. That's yoga, meditation, communion, prayer. Higher-self sex!

To have higher and lower levels awakened and awaiting in both parties in sexual union, has the extra gift of becoming like the couple as one is making love to the spirit, instead of just the person to the person. We are in union with Thee. Great sex that way. Many wonderful moments are possible in higher love making. God is the greatest lover of all, so many ways, infinite positions, and incredible allure!

Love making, sacred sexuality is not selfish at all. While fully gratifying to all levels of one's own being, the act itself becomes like an offering to Spirit, and through that then to the earth. It heals and wakes up love through our blessed Mother here, in her greater body, reminding her of how we were all birthed through love, spirit, higher sex, embodied, then “boom,” the birthing of planets, including ours, then the arising of life forms, until, at last, or least so far, us, in human bodies, our current vehicle of choice. So the mixing of spirit and sexuality in a healthy happy way becomes a love offering to the earth, which enhances Spirit's service through people, a fundamental effort and direction of Dharma, I believe.

§

Death, I believe, is a surrender from one state into another. Transition is a lovely word for it. Shedding. Releasing. Ascending. From the physical plane, we watch the ceasing of the physical aspect, that which our senses have known and experienced, and out of our attachment, beliefs and surrounding emotions, we feel the loss. We have prescribed notions of how life is supposed to be, and when death is supposed to come, and that it is bad at any time. How limited in perspective! Death is a transition like graduation from school, moving to a new town, or leaving an old situation for a new one. It involves loss and opportunity. Spirit never dies; our energies just change their locale, so to speak, from my point of view. It's sad that we hold death as bad, though immortality might be fun too! But it's not the enemy. Along with the physical process of death, or transition from the physical to entirely being located in the spiritual plane of existence, I believe there is a natural unlayering that happens energetically, including the layers of psyche that have accrued our experiences to later translate into higher wisdom, with the appropriate time, environment and support of higher vibrational states.

My aim, from the human level, is to free myself spiritually such that the point of death becomes a swift transition to my higher self without the encumbrance of lower states to deliberate long over and discern. That is the opportunity of spirituality from the human part, to unlayer, sifting through unnecessary material, energies and experiences, so as to be more available for spiritual enhancement from the higher states when transition comes. To be essential. To have my self and my homework ready, as much as can compassionately be expected, while still being unfinished. That's anxiety-producing! Or it's surrender-requiring! I believe there is a great skill to be attained in the death process, an admirable form of love and surrender. The memories of former life deaths can

be recalled to be rescripted, not the historical experience of it but the impressions it left internally (spiritually), for greater wisdom to imprint, and greater love to surround the event. It's glorious to think of all the possibilities for growth in this life! Healing traumas, growing compassion and understanding, and learning to create experiences in healthy ways, in agreement with the laws of Nature and of Spirit, the limits of temporal reality and the infinity of boundless states.

Life here, in this way, is for me, a dance between these two elements of infinite Spirit and finite Form. So much is a part of this relationship, so much can enhance one's understanding of the other, through reflection, through awe and admiration, the light of love which is enhanced through the relationship of the sacred other. The known and the unknown tease each other out to play, and to be more aware of the possibilities of creation, and thus of good.

Cara

Cara is a 50-year-old Caucasian woman who is a long time practitioner and now teacher in a relatively new (30 years) spiritual path that focuses on the self-realization of the essential and spiritual nature of the soul. The path also focuses on the embodiment of those qualities of Divine Being in daily life. Methods, practices and knowledge used are meditation, open-ended inquiry, object relations theory, Sufism, Fourth Way teachings, and Buddhism. Cara lives in Santa Rosa, California.

I don't usually think of giving meaning to my experience so much as letting the body tell me what it's nature is. Letting it reveal it's nature to me and that is an ongoing and deepening process. I certainly think all my life I was deeply interested in the body. As a child, I had many early experiences where I'd naturally be contemplating the body, and try to see in the body, and wondered about what was in the body, and why I couldn't just look in the body. Movement, as well, has always been a passion in some way in my life. It was a way that I could experience, explore reality, and so I went into all kinds of different movement paths to do that. I explored gymnastics, dance and martial arts—many different kinds of martial arts—and just whatever I could find, and many kinds of bodywork. But movement in particular, all my life, opened a door to experiences of myself and of consciousness that were outside my normal functioning.

As a young child I would love to go on vacation to wooded areas. Scrambling around rocks, I would feel all these various animals and creatures in me, and I'd make up games that involved those. Yoga poses, especially twists and inverted poses, came naturally. There was just this alive moving interest and awareness that I had, and I had a somewhat controlling mother, so it got bound up a lot. I have an important memory from fourth grade geography. We were studying a map of the world and I remember walking

home, thinking I'm going to make a map of the body, inside the body. And I looked, and I remember not being able to see, and I remember getting very, very sad that I couldn't look in the body and see the organs and begin to construct a conceptual map of the interior, hidden dimension of the body. I couldn't understand why I couldn't just look in and see the heart, and see the organs. And I remember walking home and feeling cut off from something, or separated from something in myself.

Eventually I became more and more interested in very subtle movement of the body and energy, and through working for years in deeper processes of more formless movement, I had a massive kundalini opening, or opening of consciousness and energy together. At that point, I began to see the nature of matter in a very, very different way. It certainly was like veils being ripped open to the nature of matter, to the vibratory transparent nature of matter, of all matter, and then also, of the human, of living matter, and so-called inert matter. That created both a crisis and a turning in my journey. It felt like I had learned to discriminate, through the movement practices I was involved in, more and more subtle movements and vibration until I tapped into the very atomic force of matter, that then exploded in the cells of my body. So my awareness was becoming more and more subtle and going into deep spaces. At the time of the actual energy opening I felt there were literally millions of atomic bombs exploding in my cells. It certainly felt like seeing the first Fire, the Biblical face of God, and I was not certain that I would survive the blast of it. I felt I had wandered into a secret chamber of existence, into the core of the atomic nature, with no preparation, and not really knowing what I had landed in, but with a very pure heart. That part lasted for many months. My experience was one of existing in a body which was vibrating at such a fast speed, that I couldn't actually register. That went on from May through December.

So there was both an opening of consciousness or awareness and energy, the energy of that providing the support or dynamism for this vast opening of my awareness. Given that I was unprepared for the opening and the immensity of the energy that was set loose in my organism, it fairly destroyed my body, my nervous system, as well as my organ energy. There were rapid and difficult changes going on for years in my body, in which I got very ill, developed auto immune diseases. I watched how the energy opened my consciousness, and then how it moved through and affected the body. And then I had to go on a healing journey, to heal the body.

Eventually, I felt like I was dying, that I was getting so weak from the force of the energy, and I felt myself preparing to die. I could feel the soul was lifting out of the form, and I realized I really had to find a way to begin to bring a world of form back into apprehension. My consciousness was absorbed and concentrated in a world of vibration, boundless vibration. The forms were only loosely there in the foreground. What I did was, I went out and I started naming things, and I named myself. I said, "I'm Cara, and this is a tree." I remember eating dirt: "This is dirt." I put it into my mouth. I tried to bring my awareness back into my more concrete and distinct senses, into something that was formed, solid, stable, and non-vibratory. And that actually had a different effect. It began to slow the energy down enough to where I didn't feel like I was dying, and so my body vibration began to slow and the body began to relax more. But what it did was it closed my consciousness too. So then I had a world that was more solid and slower, but it was like cardboard almost, it was like a shell, a shell over the world. I could see the forms and relate to them and feel them again, but it was shell-like, separated from the living presence.

What motivated me at the time to explore my experience in that way with movement was both a love of movement and a sense of the ancient love affair of the body and soul. I think about the word “body” a lot and how we use it in conventional language. Because it doesn’t exist in the way we commonly think of it. I think of it often as a precious vehicle of consciousness, a mysterious form that is in every way the perfect vehicle and expression of true nature, and the perfect form for the Soul to experience her fruition and fullness. So the body isn’t a thing at all. It can be both an expression of the constriction and pain in our souls and it can express the luminous and transparent nature of our deeper reality, and often at the same time. So we can experience it on a continuum from a very dense rubbery, kind of heavy locked up substance, to vastly different substances. It’s a mysterious substance of potentiality. Just thinking about it and talking about it always makes me feel what a blessing it is to have this precious human body!

The process of bringing the world of forms back, was a process of re-entering the conceptual world, and as a result, diminishing the field of presence in a sense. Or we could say that bringing the conceptual world foreground again, meant closing down the perception of the vibratory alive boundless presence I had been immersed in. I kind of willed ordinary consciousness back, so that I could live and assist my physical body through the experience. About the same time I met both my future husband and I joined the spiritual work of which I am now a teacher. So I began to work with myself both in relationship and in formal practice that emphasized the development of presence. The way all of this came together was very helpful to me. Not only did I have a place to learn more directly about the nature of the soul and consciousness, but I had a stable home life. Over a period of years, I began to work with consciousness and states of presence. But it was also like watching the dismemberment of the body from the effects of the energy,

and I had to work intensively for many years on my immune system, and lead a very careful life.

Over the next 9 months I tried many things to affect what seemed like this atomic fire that was out of control and burning it's way through my body. I ate like a football player. I ate meat. Nothing would affect the energy itself. It had to just play itself out. There was no way that I could affect it in any way, and that was one of the scary things about it. I was still relatively young. There were a lot of skills with my own body and energy I didn't have. I didn't know how to surrender fully. I couldn't sleep for years. I had all kinds of uncontrollable heat in my system. My adrenals were completely exhausted, beyond exhausted. It felt like a war zone in my body, it felt like a decimated landscape. That's actually how I felt myself inside. I felt very burnt, dry, lifeless, and harsh.

Though I had been engaged in meditation practice for many years prior to the experience just described, this opening was of such a different order and magnitude than anything I had encountered prior to that time. It had components of near-death experiences (NDE), but where NDE's tend to be out-of-body experiences, due to the kundalini energy that became engaged and my deep conditioning to sense the body it was a vivid-in-the body experience of expansion and loss of personal and physical identity and boundary. Having one's individual conscious ushered into the underpinnings of physical reality, and then expanded to experience the source of the energy level of the energy/matter matrix, had a level of devastating intensity. My practice over the next 18 years has been to work with the structures of the body/mind identities and challenge them in a more fundamental way so that they are more and more transparent to the boundless nature of Sacred Mind.

I'm still profoundly interested in the ultimate nature and consciousness of matter. There are many, many masters where the state of I am-ness is stable and is complete, but that state doesn't tell us much about the nature of the body that is supporting that realization. It's beyond the body or doesn't have anything to do with the body. We know far more about spiritual states and psychological states than we know about the body. We know more about essential states, such as compassion, joy, clarity, discriminating awareness, than we know about matter. I asked one of my teachers recently, a deeply realized being, what he really knows about the body. His response was "I know the body is a form of consciousness, just like any other form. It arises and it dissipates, like every other form, whether it's a thought or a feeling," he said, "and I know it lasts longer than those other forms. And that's all I know for sure." I feel there is a deep thrust and thirst in the collective unconscious to know matter; I believe we see this thrust in the discovery of the DNA design, the mapping of the human genome, to name a few areas of inquiry in science.

I actually feel, as outrageous as this seems, that it's not enough in our day to be self-realized, for it's own sake. The world of matter must also participate in this realization, that that's what is central to the evolution of consciousness. What would that mean for the earth itself is to be enlightened, all the cells, all the elements. In a certain way, all this consciousness that is developed through practice, the purpose of it is to transform the vessel as well. I've been studying and looking into the kinds of bodies that transform through spiritual experience. Not just those where we have realization and that magnificent flame of realization is present, and then the body decays and dies, like Ramana Maharshi's body. His students were crying that he was going to die, and he said, "Where do you think I'm going?" But his body was devastated; his body had cancer. And

then there are teachers like Aurobindo and the Mother who were trying to understand something about the evolution of matter itself. And Christ and his resurrection body, there's a whole other view of matter in his work. What I mean by that is the internalization, the internal exploration of his work, of his consciousness, gives you a very different view.

Many people who tap into the species mind or the breadth of boundless consciousness through matter and the evolution of all forms of life on the planet, relate "seeing" past and future forms of life. For myself, at one point I could see the "future body." I've read many accounts of the future human body. It was a much lighter body and more responsive to mind and feeling. If a new organ was needed, it could manifest. It was more like a manifestation body. What I see right now, if you look at the genome project, all these medicines that are coming out, it's like we're deconstructing the nature of matter, of the physical body, to try to create through manipulation of the matrix of matter, elements of the "future body."

One thing we could say is that you can have a state of consciousness, state of being, and that can arise with or without a sense of identity in it. You could be aware of boundless peace, something like that, and not a sense of 'I.' Or that could arise with a sense that this peace is here, and it is 'I.'

There are many ways to think about the question of embodiment. One way we could think about embodiment is that if this body is a vessel for consciousness, embodiment would be then that whatever state was arising is completely felt throughout the whole being, including the body aspect of being or consciousness.

For example, the tension, pain, numbness, and deadness we feel in the body, is the embodiment of the personality structure, with its set of beliefs, conditioned ideas, and

mental constructs based on history. All of that's expressed in the body as tension, deadness, numbness. We could say that the capacity for embodiment is always there in the soul. Another example might be with the embodiment of "essential strength," or the presence that brings with it a sense of aliveness, capacity to create or take initiative, dynamism, or clarity. If that strength were "embodied" in the soul, we would feel those qualities as the very fabric and nature of our being, presumably including in the body.

If, for example, your state of consciousness is mostly clarity, is mirror-like clarity, then you might experience all that you perceive as that clarity, again, including the body, as just a clear, clear diamond. And everywhere you looked and every sensation (if there were sensation), every everything, would be clarity. And there may or may not be a sense of "this is me," or "I-ness," or "I am that clarity." It might just be clarity is present. That's what actually I think the body, the vehicle, that's one of the divine purposes of the body, is to express our states of being. That would be one way to think about embodiment, that whatever state of presence or consciousness is there in the being, it's embodied to the extent that the body is, that that is worked through the body. In other words, if there are any barriers in the body to that expressing fully in the body, then that would be an obstacle. That would be something to work through.

Many spiritual traditions aren't interested in embodiment at all in this way. The body is seen as an obstacle to realization. The "I am the body" idea and conviction is what blocks the soul from realizing the truth and source of her deeper nature. Certainly the deepest realization of ourselves, our deepest identity, is beyond the manifest world. But I often contemplate Ramana Maharshi's idea that each blade of grass, each insect and animal, and I would say each organ and cell of the body, has a desire and right to

realize its true nature, has a right to participate in the self-realization of being. Nothing needs to be left behind in the great sweep of enlightening.

I remember once being in a state of love, divine love, and how all the cells of my organism were participating in it. I went to the bathroom and I remember the urine. The feeling of the urine, the sound of the fluids, the cells in the urine all felt like it was that love. What stops us from enlightening the body in that way? What keeps the body in a kind of endarkened state? I mean, we know that consciousness is not dependent upon the body, right? We know that. We know that from outer body experience.

There are teacher and traditions that seem to have a different approach to the enlightenment (and therefore embodiment of enlightenment) of matter. The teachings of Swami Ramalingum, Sri Aurobindo and Jesus Christ, actually, come to mind. There seems to me to be a different approach to the completion of the evolution of matter in their teachings. Swami R. is said to have manifested a golden truth body at his death, dematerialized in part so that the idea and reality of deathlessness could be seeded on the planet. Aurobindo was definitely interested in the evolution of the nature of matter.

Often it seems like what we're doing is we're using the body as a nice sturdy meditation cushion, to get the rocket off. But we have not yet explored the complete human. It seems to me that unless we explore, unless the body and the organs are enlightened, we will not be complete human beings. That is, I often feel, our evolutionary thrust. That's actually the thrust I see in the science that's going on. I see one body often, or "species body," and feel one body. And I sense into what are the changes in that body. You and I are specks, waves in that ocean. There's one human body. It's a vessel. It keeps recreating itself over and over. (There is no body at all, really, there's practices and there's consciousness, and it's a fluid dynamic form that keeps reproducing itself.)

I feel that part of the reason I'm asking and you're asking that question, is because you're a woman. I've never heard a man exactly talk about matter like we are right now—the love, the thrill, and the desire to understand the inner nature and true nature of the body. For most male teachers, or even students for that matter, that's not where they go. But women, I feel that it's a very feminine thing to want the enlightenment of the body itself. Although the teachers I'm speaking about are not women. And that's been a terrible thing to me, to not have many woman teachers, women explorers who are writing and speaking about these things. There are more men, it seems, than women. I don't know why that is.

For a while I read as much as I could on healing, so that's a whole other branch of the enlightenment of the body as a capacity to heal, which is a certain function, and it's right in here with this topic for me. I remember at a point in my path when I felt like I had to choose whether I was going to explore self-realization or healing. The question got answered for me. At one point I was talking to a friend who's a Vipassana teacher about why don't we have enlightened teachers and healers together in one person, because many healers are not particularly enlightened. They can be great healers, but they're often not particularly self-realized. We were exploring that, and I felt how sad that I didn't know any women, from any tradition, who both had a profound healing gift and were self-realized.

This seems to be our task as women. We need to get all of it. Ultimately what we need is for women, for all practitioners, but for women in particular, to be confident in what they're perceiving. I think for women practitioners, they really need confidence in their own consciousness somehow, that unfolding, confidence in what they're actually perceiving. We need women who come to enough fruition in their development that they

can begin then to investigate, and trust what they're finding, and not have big parts of personality structure that are really influencing what they're saying.

Janet Adler

Janet Adler is a 62-year-old Jewish-American woman. She is the mother of two sons, a longtime teacher in the discipline of Authentic Movement, and the author of two books: Arching Backward (1995) and Offering from the Conscious Body (2002); and two films: Looking for Me and Still Looking. Janet experienced an intense 5-year-long spiritual initiation that she documents in her first book. She lives in Sonoma County, California.

When you started to name the six questions, I immediately went all the way back to the beginning of my life. The combination of what happened to me as an infant, and whatever genetic coding I came in with, that combination, plus my relationship with my mother—I think it all was right there. Or how I grew had everything to do with these realities in terms of my relationship to my body. I was ill the whole first year of my life, and couldn't digest foods. I was put in the hospital at thirteen months by a doctor who was not a kind person. He was supposedly the "best pediatrician in the state of Indiana." But this man, really, I think was quite soul-less, and heartless in his treatment of infants and children.

I was tied down. I was force fed. I was not allowed to see my mother, or any other person in my little life for six weeks. I was abandoned. The doctor took the hair ribbons, the toys, the clothes, everything. I was stripped bare, in a completely foreign place. As often children do to escape pain, both psychological and physical, I imagine I left my body—if a baby can do that. I think I did, for many reasons.

The experience of premature separation, psychologically, and then the physical pain—I think those two things happening probably made me more sensitive in terms of the nervous system which I already had. I was always very sensitive. I was never athletic

or sturdy. I was delicate, these are words that I'm told about. I was frightened of the dark and frightened of leaving my mother. In my school world, I was very social, involved and loved relationships. In terms of my inner life, I was frightened and very sensitive to everyone's energy and behavior. If somebody looked at me with a cross face, I would be overwhelmed with grief for displeasing them. I think I made some association around bad and good. If you're bad you go to that place (the hospital), and if you're good you stay with your mother. So I was very, very good. Physical pain was always shocking as well as painful, and I think that's because of the physical pain that I endured in the hospital. There I was not protected or in relationship to the person who was making the pain happen.

When the initiation began in my 40th year, I still had that same nervous system. I think about that, and even now when we go on a walk at the beach, if a dry reed in the dunes pricks my bare foot I spontaneously scream and my knees buckle. And I fall down into the sand. This is a little extreme! This is my response to pain. It's so shocking to feel this needle coming into my foot, shocking and surprising, and it hurts unbearably. I imagine everyone feels this with physical pain in some way or another, but I think I'm very much on the end of the spectrum where it's hard for my nervous system to organize around that. When the kundalini energy came, I was already very sensitive to anything that entered my body.

I became a dancer at probably the age of 2. This was my passion. I loved to dance. My whole identity as a child, for as long as I can remember into adolescence, was dancing. This was my everything. I was coming into my body, coming into my body, coming into my body. I was a very embodied child. At night when it was dark, and it was time to be still and alone, I was more open to what I couldn't see. Could I fall asleep

safely? It's always interesting to imagine how it would have been *if*. I imagine I would have had more fluidity in moving in and out of other realms as a child, if I hadn't somehow been hurled out for reasons of survival during the hospital trauma. I wasn't one of these children that was full of fantasies and inner experiences that would take me away. I stayed in my body.

I knew immediately that the initiation was of value, and I knew that I knew something about other energy realms, and the only thing that I can connect that to is the infant trauma. In the literature that I have studied, often there was a trauma or an illness, or a very challenging time, in the lives of children who later experienced initiatory phenomena.

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My childhood ended when I became a sexual person, which was around age 22. Although my sexuality was clear in its arrival at age 13, I wasn't sexually active until I was a young woman. My mother was a very loving woman, warm and demonstrative. She was an artist, a ceramist and sculptor. She had wonderful warm, soft hands. My first memory is of her touch on the inside of my knee after a nap. I was very little, maybe one and a half. I always felt that she loved my body, and I think she loved her own body. In that time women's beauty was determined by the patriarch. She was indeed a beautiful woman. I think she had positive experiences about being in her body and that was transferred to me. I always loved my body, and I loved the sensations of dancing and moving, especially. I loved the popular dancing, and I was in recitals all the time, performing.

All those years, between 22 and 40—when the initiation happened, my sexual energy was strong and positive. I felt like I had a good relationship to it. I wasn't worried

about being overwhelmed by it. Somehow that all worked out okay. But I think about that, because when the initiation happened, the strength of the energetic phenomena reminded me in a certain way of the strength of my sexual energy. I've always known them as intimately related.

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In the initiation, by necessity, I learned to strengthen my boundaries when the force of the energy was so great that I feared I couldn't stay here, and felt my own life on the line. I would see electric "wires" going out from my body, into which the energy was funneling. Following the energy out, I knew that there was a critical distance beyond which I could not get back. When the energy was too strong, I wasn't always sure where my boundary was or whether I could hold it, track it well enough, so that I could always get back. I can remember very specifically certain moments when I felt like I knew I would die if I did not stay in my body "enough."

In those years of initiatory experience, the first and most compelling reason to remain in my body was being the mother of two small boys. I was separated. I knew that I will not leave these children. This is like a command, an inner command. No matter how incredible these experiences are, no matter what they teach me, I will never leave these children, unless I die from this. But I'm not going to allow that to happen. So it was a tremendous experience of will, and I think I came in with that. Maybe that's why I survived in the hospital and didn't become a depressed child, which many children left in hospitals do. I have relived the trauma three times, which has been deeply healing—essential to my well-being—twice before my initiation and once since.

During my initiation, the first thing that helped me to be able to consciously stay in my body was my intention to not leave my children, to not be unable to care for my

children. The other thing was my practice of witnessing myself, which came from the discipline of Authentic Movement to which I've been so devoted for these last 30 years. The task of the witness is to stay present and to keep track of what the mover is doing and of what one's own experiences are in the presence of the mover. I'd only been practicing 10 years, and I was developing an understanding of the practice as I was going along. I don't think I was very good at it yet, but perhaps good "enough." It was the actual practice of just insisting that I know, that I keep track of what was happening that kept me grounded, staying present. And the writing of the visions I received, or what the boys were doing, or what was happening around me, helped me to continue to language my experience. The languaging was what made it conscious enough so that I could stay present enough.

And I knew, having been a therapist, that if I merged with the energy I would become psychotic. I knew that. Images of being on crosses, the sensations of the nails going into my palms and ankles, and things like that, or all this light, becoming a diamond—I knew that that was not me, my personality, that these were visual images that I was being given. But they were not to be identified with for a second. So the two dangers: one with the psychosis, which I knew would happen if I merged; and the other was death, which I knew would happen if I couldn't stay here enough. I can remember those moments when I felt like I was just teetering on the edge of actual, physical death. Yes, that's what I mean. And it was my will or my practice, or the combination, and grace that said "No. No." But that just took every ounce of me, and often I wasn't sure whether I could do it. It was so hard to stay present, *so* hard sometimes, too exhausting, too demanding.

I find that this is true in my work with several of my students who are having very intense experiences of kundalini energy. It can be so tedious to stay present, and the practice . . . I can see how this practice can really be helpful. The mover goes out into the emptiness and closes her eyes and intends to open to the energy, and then when it comes in, she has to stay present. She has to know that her wrist is extended, that her shoulder drops, that her chin falls, that the other thumb reaches. She has to practice: *Where am I now? Where am I now? Here I am.* And so we just track every detail we can to strengthen the practice of her inner witness staying present enough. That's really what I was doing through the initiation, even with the visions. I have to remember every detail of this vision, so that I can write it down. I can't merge with it by abandoning my inner witness.

It took me 20 years, isn't that incredible? It took me 20 years to integrate all that has happened to me in those 10 years. It took a long time for all of that energy to integrate. I feel in the last 2 years, finally, that I'm in alignment enough. My personality, my emotionality, my physicality, my spiritual being, everything has come into alignment. Now, it's not like 20 years ago, when the energy was happening to me and I had to learn how to come into conscious relationship to it, which I knew was the task. I believe very strongly that this is our task. The energy is a gift. Our job is to learn how to come into relationship to it, not to merge with it, and not to deny it. It is dangerous to do either one, I think. But how can we come into conscious relationship to it? That was like a full time job for twenty years, because I had all kinds of physical problems after that. It wrecked my nervous system, and it wrecked my immune system. I was sick all the time with every flu and virus. I was exhausted, for years and years. I spent so much time on the couch when I wasn't earning a living, or being with the children. Now instead of the energy

happening to me, there is no separation between the energy and me . . . not all the time at all, but more and more.

I am living this. When I go out to pick the flower, the clarity of the flower is the mystery of the flower. Things are as they are now. Looking at you here now it's as though, *Oh, here you are, I see you*, without so much veiling because of my own density, my projections, interpretations, associations. I feel less encumbered by those ways of being.

The flower is separate from me because of its shape, and color, and form, and substance. But it is also imbued with the same life force that I am. We share an energy perhaps, but we're different forms. Witnessing it, I am in a unitive state with it. This is how I understand the witness practice. A witness isn't looking at the mover. A witness is participating, opening to her own experience in the presence of the mover. So in the presence of the flower I am opening but not merging, and not veiling myself because I can't bear the beauty, or the fact that it always needs watering, or all of those things that keep us separate. It is a blessing when I am in a unitive state with the flower.

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When you ask, "Is there a location?" [to the 'I' or self,] I see and experience just the space, the emptiness. It is shaped by my form, but my skin feels permeable. I feel the same with the energy around me. But I also feel that I am in this body, which separates me from the energy around me, except that I don't feel that separation, again, as a merging. There are three ways that I think about this. The dialogic state is, I am saying to myself, "Two fingers now are touching my heart; I am nodding my head; the bottom of my foot is a little cold, and I can feel the carpet under it." That is dialogic, where my moving self and my inner witness are in relationship. And then in a unitive state, I think

of our experience as very different from the merged state. But it can sometimes look the same.

In a unitive state, I am totally aware of what I am doing, but I am not in dialogue about it. There is no duality, but I am fully conscious. I have a conscious presence, whereas if I'm merged with what I am doing, I don't have a conscious presence. I have the blessing more and more, and not all the time, but more and more, of experiencing these moments of grace, where I just feel that I am in a unitive state. But I'm not absent. I haven't merged with the flower. I am in the presence of the flower, and conscious, but I'm not talking to myself. I'm not saying, "Oh my God, what a beautiful flower. Look at its color. Look at its shape. I remember this flower in my grandmother's garden." This is why mystics refer to this as direct experience, because it is without the density of all of this stuff, which we're made up of as people. It is such a blessing, and so much grace to not be living in that density all of the time. In my own experience, in the density there is not a lot of light, and there is not a lot of space, and there is not a lot of time. In the density, I feel time bound. I feel the space more contracted or limited. And because of the density, light cannot get through.

I have less and less tolerance for not being clear in my body. Since the initiation, when I don't have this clear, empty, light experience of my body, I don't like it. I don't tolerate disturbance of that clear place very well and of course I endure it often.

For me there isn't anything else to do, but to keep practicing in relationship to this longing toward presence. For two reasons: because I prefer it to the density and also, well, I can see much more clearly. I am so grateful for—and I trust my intuitive knowing. Intuitive knowing, I think, is born out of that kind of space. Instead of saying, "Oh, I think I would like a cup of tea," there are times, in certain moments of *grace* when I

consciously get up and make a cup of tea with clear intention, but without the dialogue to make such a decision. It's a very seamless way of being.

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I want to be prepared for death—for my own death, and for the death of those who I love, and for the death of those who I don't know but who are dying all of the time, all of the time. I want to be more and more able to be in conscious relationship to all death.

I think of my mother who is 87 years old. And I think of how I am trying to prepare for the end of her life. During the initiation, when the energy came, also came death. They were synonymous. I was acutely aware always of the fragility of our lives, of my life, of the children's lives, my husband's life, my mother's life, acutely aware. And now that this alignment has come about, and I don't have the energy coming as a separate phenomenon so much the way it used to, death now is the same as life. The energy brought death to me, and now it is part of me all the time. I am aware of death all the time. I think less of my own death, in terms of where I need to work, and more about the death of the people that I love. I continue to have much work to do around physical pain which can also relate to the process of dying.

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As a child I had a recurring terrifying vision—now I know it was a vision, and not an image or a dream—of me floating in the night sky, in a little child's bed. It was a brass bed. It must have been a picture that I had seen from a fairy book story or something. It's a very specific bed with an arch and slats at the headboard, and a little bit of that at the foot. It's a little child's bed, just a little bed. I am lying there, and the sheet is ironed, the blanket is ironed, and the sheet is folded over. And I am dead. I'm floating in the night

universe, and I can see down to a very specific place. It is the earth—brown and green—and it looks like a geography globe. I must have seen this image somewhere. Somehow, the early experience of the trauma and going out of my body—this is what I conjecture—as I grew, fell into images that I selected as a growing child, to make that picture. So I am floating in the night universe with my hands like this [Janet folds her hands across her chest], and I am dead. And the words underneath are, “Forever, and ever, and ever, and ever, and ever,” and I am terrified of living no end. Perhaps I associated this with being put there in the hospital, abandoned, with no preparation and nothing familiar. I don’t know how a baby organizes this . . . something about endless and infinite, and being out of my body. That experience was the darkest piece of my childhood, and that recurring vision—I never spoke about it to anyone as a child.

I don’t see so many visions now, and when they come they just come and they are easy to see and receive. But a few years ago, I had a whole series of visions, actually, in which that bed was dismantled. I was sitting as an adult woman in the night universe, and I was holding the dead child. She sat between my legs, and I wrapped the sheet and blanket around us. We witnessed parts of the bed burning, and parts being hurled into space. I have it written down somewhere. I am holding her. We become the same. She comes into my middle, into my hara. As she and I become the same, it is quite a literal experience, sensation wise, of life and death at the same time. Death of the wound, as I have known it and renewed life, or rebirth. Some people might understand that experience as soul retrieval.

A mystical practice for me must include the fullness of the personhood. It is not about just what happens in these clear places, but it’s all of the stuff, and the clearing of the stuff. And the embodiment of the practice is to know the density, and at times to have

the privilege of becoming liberated from it by going into and through it, rather than just talking about it, or understanding it; embodiment.

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In the epilogue of my first book, *Archiving Backward*, I wrote a poem that is about my longing. I see a vessel—it was a vision—that has a very narrow rim, not like that one, here in the corner of this studio, that is a deep empty vessel, but this is a very wide vessel, very shallow. May people who have their turns after me be received, and held in this vessel, and honored by the collective. May these experiences be safely endured so that the richness from them can be somehow offered back. I feel like this is starting to happen. Many more people now are receiving energetic phenomena within the safety of conscious relationship with a teacher or a guide, within a culture that is opening toward accepting extraordinary experiences that—because of commitment to conscious presence—can become integrated into ordinary and daily life. Let's pick some flowers before you go.

Chapter 5: Discussion

I will begin this discussion section by briefly mapping out my essential interpretations borne from this study, to give the reader an overview of my understandings. The rest of the chapter will be devoted to elucidating my understandings by weaving in the voices of my participants, presenting to the reader how I came to understand this topic of spirit and flesh joined in a mystical woman's body. I will highlight the ways in which my understanding of the topic has changed throughout the course of this study. I will conclude this chapter with comments and reflections on intuitive inquiry as a research method, and I will offer remarks on the possibilities for further research on mysticism and the body.

A central interpretation—what I understand to be at the heart of my findings—is that women who have devoted their lives to God, to a path of spiritual inquiry, tend to go through a process of disidentification and re-identification with the body. This process on first sight may appear to be sequential in nature, but upon further inquiry this process reveals itself as a dialectic between identification with emptiness and re-identification with form, taking place over and over, deepening throughout one's lifetime.

Further interpretations involve a variety of possibilities and insights a woman might encounter, especially in relation to the body, as she goes through a mature spiritual evolution. These interpretations, to a large degree, group themselves around my initial interview questions, and are therefore clearly guided by my own understanding and inquiry into the topic. While my intention during the interviews was to remain open to the organic direction of each dialogue, still, I had particular questions I brought to the discussion. It is impossible to know what stories would have emerged from interviews with a different set of questions, or, with the same questions, but a different interviewer.

Even with an intention to remain open to the flow and surprise inherent to a semi-structured interview, clearly, my particular presence and interview questions shaped the data that arose from the interviews.

In addition to my central interpretation, the following themes—interpretive lenses—are distilled from my interviews with these 12 contemporary women mystics: (a) childhood experiences, from visions to trauma, serve as a catalyst for spiritual sensitivity in the body; (b) the body serves as a barometer, where intuition becomes physicalized; (c) transformation of the body occurs on a cellular level; (d) being embodied is a choiceful act; (e) sexuality is integral to embodiment; (f) bringing spirit into matter is purposeful; (g) spiritual maturation includes an energetic awakening of the body; (h) boundaries—between you and me, world and self—are experienced as permeable; (i) self reference, or awareness of ‘I,’ is fluid and flexible and is not fixed in the body; (j) the contemplation of death brings into focus the immediacy of life; (k) women are teachers of conscious embodiment; and (l) inquiring into the relationship between body and spirit deepens and enlivens one’s experience of living as a body. Before moving into a more nuanced discussion of the present lenses which I have outlined thus far, I will first reflect on the lenses as a whole, in relationship to earlier lenses presented in both Cycles 1 and 2 of this study.

Recalling Cycle 1 of this project—the stage in which the researcher engages a text so that an exact research question may be revealed—I am struck by the sense of vagueness that surrounded my topic during that time. An amorphous quality that at times caused me frustration, arose amidst my first considerations of the topic. At the end of Cycle 1, I knew generally what my topic was—spirit and the body—though I was still uncertain as to what aspects of this topic I would study. My understanding of the topic at

that point fluctuated between a few broad questions including: (1) What is the relationship between spirituality, the body, and sexuality? (2) What is the relationship between spirit and self? (3) How is the body experienced in relationship to self and spirit, for spiritually inclined women? (4) How is transcendence, in terms of the body, important to spiritual development? This is where my understanding was, as I moved from Cycle 1 into Cycle 2 of the study.

During Cycle 2 of this research, I engaged various texts and came up with 20 initial lenses. In considering the relationship between these lenses generated in Cycle 2, and my current understandings presented in this chapter, my guiding question is this: To what degree does my present understanding of the topic differ from, expand and elaborate upon, or challenge my earlier lenses? Generally speaking, I have found that my lenses—my understanding of the topic—have changed significantly, sometimes modestly and sometimes dramatically, since my first articulation of the lenses in Cycle 2.

To facilitate a fluid discussion between the two sets of lenses—from Cycles 2 and 3—the following table reprints those lenses generated in Cycle 2:

Table 1: Cycle 2 Lenses

1. Inquiring into the tension between spirit and the body enlivens one's felt sense of living as a body.
2. Transcendence or disidentification from one's body (or the realization of the body as impermanent) can produce the experience of freedom and liberation.
3. I am not the body.
4. The body is impermanent.
5. Spirit, that which animates our fleshly form, is eternal.
6. Spirit transcends flesh, meaning spirit encompasses flesh.

7. Part of being human includes fear of the death of this physical form, the body.
8. There is a felt sense that at times awareness expands beyond the boundaries of my body, though it includes my body.
9. Sometimes it feels like spirit, or awareness, is located outside or behind (my head, to be exact) my body.
10. Form, flesh is temporal.
11. It is useful (as a spiritual practice) to contemplate death, the eventual end of our physical form.
12. Energy animates our physical body.
13. Evolution of consciousness includes facing our mortality.
14. Physical sensations of energy bring up a fear response (kundalini rising).
15. Energy that animates the body is benign and even has healing capacities.
16. Sexuality is body bound.
17. Transcendence is preferred over the body realm.
18. Awareness exists after death.
19. An interconnection exists between body and spirit.
20. Women are more embodied than men.

More specifically, the ways in which my new understandings (Cycle 3 lenses) are in relationship to my initial ones (Cycle 2 lenses) could be understood as falling into three categories: new, change, and seed lenses. First, certain present understandings or lenses appear to be entirely new, not directly in relationship to any of my specific earlier intuitions or assumptions. At least on a conscious level, I had not anticipated these findings during Cycles 1 and 2. As these insights began to emerge, it often felt like the trickster (Anderson, 2000) was at work (or play) with me—catching me off guard, confusing me at times, and presenting to me surprising and unexpected results. I am

calling these interpretations *new lenses*. Second, there are those lenses that came into being through earlier assumptions and understandings being challenged, changed, or transformed throughout the duration of the study. In these cases, there is a direct relationship between certain lenses in Cycle 2 and those found in Cycle 3—a progression or change can be seen in my thinking. In many ways, it was in these instances that I grew the most, because as my assumptions and beliefs were being challenged and changed, I was transforming through the process. I am calling these interpretations *change lenses*. Third, there are those lenses that seem to have their seeds embedded in an earlier lens, or combination of a few lenses. Then through a process of being stretched, expanded, combined, and deepened, those earlier intuitions or rudimentary understandings came into a full, nuanced expression in Cycle 3, one that might be traced back to earlier seeds from Cycle 2. I am calling these interpretations *seed lenses*.

In considering further the *new lenses*, those interpretations which caught me by surprise and where the work of the trickster was involved, they represent a category of understandings that I did not anticipate during Cycle 2. This was because either they were not in my conscious mind, even if I may have heard such considerations at some point in my life (such as (a) childhood experiences, from visions to trauma, serve as a catalyst for spiritual sensitivity in the body); or, in other cases, I had simply no sense of an understanding until it tapped me on the shoulder and sometimes even startled me (such as (d) being embodied is a choiceful act). This was an exciting and at times confusing process.

Turning to the *change lenses*, those lenses which evolved through my earlier assumptions being challenged and changed represent a particularly exciting and personally revealing process in the research. What is most significant in this area of the

findings is the discovery that became my central interpretation (see Table 2). To a large degree, I started out this research project in a type of spiritual quandary, one that is illustrated in the following two questions which I contemplated for many years: Does spiritual evolution require one to primarily disidentify from the body, transcend our material form? Or, is spiritual evolution primarily concerned with learning to realize our embodied nature, to identify with our humanness as one expression of the divine?

Although it was often suggested to me by spiritual and scholarly teachers and friends that it was not necessary to position these possibilities in opposition to one another, I had to discover this for myself. As much as I attempted to cognitively hold these two positions—transcendence and embodiment—in a dialectic, they continued to live within me as a dichotomy.

In the very early stages of this study, prior to my research topic being entirely clear to me, I recall having an ongoing conversation with a professor who is now part of this dissertation committee, Kaisa Puhakka. In a written comment to me regarding some writing I had done pertaining to my struggle between transcendence and embodiment, Puhakka wrote, “These are important, profound questions you raise. I have a feeling that they are at your ‘cutting edge’ and will not remain idle or unanswered on your journey from here onward. I’d like to see you push the inquiry further!” (personal communication, June 5, 2000). And so I did. My central interpretation articulates an understanding that is now felt and known as a lived experience—the realization of emptiness (transcendence) is incomplete until it is brought into form (embodiment) so that awakening can take place in each cell. This illustrates a profound shift, a major change, in my understanding. A further discussion of this and other change lenses will be explored throughout this chapter.

In taking a closer look at the *seed lenses*, those which I intuited at a “seed level” during my initial interpretations, I encounter within me an ongoing question which I continually reflect upon: Is it likely or even possible for entirely new understandings to emerge from the data, using the intuitive inquiry method? Or is the very nature of this research method one that suggests that even “new” understandings could only be recognized through my subjective vantage point, informed by my personal life experience? In other words, the very nature of intuitive inquiry challenges the assumption that it is possible to discover objective truths in the positivistic sense, completely apart from the researcher’s subjectivity. The interpretations, understandings, or lenses that I present here are a reflection of a dialogue, a dialectic between my subjective vantage point and the objective data with which I came into contact. Interpretation is beyond the distinction between the subjective and the objective, for it is discovered in the space that exists between the two. Therefore, I do believe it is possible to discover “new” findings using this method of research. However, true to the very nature of hermeneutic interpretation, even new or surprising findings are being recognized and perceived through the researcher’s subjectivity.

A summary of Cycle 3 lenses, in relationship to each of the three categories previously outlined, is as follows:

Table 2: Cycle 3 Lenses

New Lenses: Tricksters & Surprises Result in Unexpected Interpretations

1. (a) Childhood experiences, from visions to trauma, serve as a catalyst for spiritual sensitivity in the body.
2. (b) The body serves as a barometer, where intuition becomes physicalized.
3. (c) Transformation of the body occurs on a cellular level.

4. (d) Being embodied is a choiceful act.

Change Lenses: Challenge & Change Result in New Interpretations

1. Central Interpretation:

Women who have devoted their lives to God, to a path of spiritual inquiry, tend to go through a process of disidentification and re-identification with the body. This process on first sight may appear to be sequential in nature, but upon further inquiry this process reveals itself as a dialectic between identification with emptiness and re-identification with form, taking place over and over, deepening throughout one's lifetime.

2. (e) Sexuality is integral to embodiment.
3. (f) Bringing spirit into matter is purposeful.

Seed Lenses: Deepened, Refined, Nuanced Insights & Interpretations

1. (g) Spiritual maturation includes an energetic awakening of the body.
 2. (h) Boundaries—between you and me, world and self—are experienced as permeable.
 3. (i) Self reference, or awareness of 'I,' is fluid and flexible and is not fixed in the body.
 4. (j) The contemplation of death brings into focus the immediacy of life.
 5. (k) Women are teachers of conscious embodiment.
 6. (l) Inquiring into the relationship between body and spirit deepens and enlivens one's experience of living as a body.
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The lenses that I will now turn to articulate my subjective understanding of the material, for it is my own life experience that allows me to see the particular lenses that emerged through my engagement with the texts. As a result, the lived experience of engaging with these women's stories has revealed certain dynamics, or understandings, that I will now reflect further upon.

Central Interpretation: A Change Lens

Women who have devoted their lives to God, to a path of spiritual inquiry, tend to go through a process of disidentification and re-identification with the body. This process on first sight may appear to be sequential in nature, but upon further inquiry this process reveals itself as a dialectic between identification with emptiness and re-identification with form, taking place over and over, deepening throughout one's lifetime.

Prior to the beginning of this study, I often found myself asking the question, *Am I my body or am I not my body?* While for many years I viewed this as an “either/or” question, what I have slowly come to understand throughout this study—and know in my bones—is that both are simultaneously true. *I am my body and I am not my body.* ‘I’—this consciousness that is expressing itself as this form that is my flesh—am completely interwoven with this body. This body is me. This flesh that is my body is not separate from *being*, though being may extend out beyond the time and space of my fleshy existence. *Being* is my body, includes my body, gives form to my body, and being transcends my body. Being does not end at the boundaries of my skin. Being is embedded in flesh, the flesh that is me, and you. This notion of being which is embedded in flesh—being which is mixed in and ultimately no different from matter which is flesh—is beautifully articulated in the work of Merleau-Ponty.

I am reminded of the literature previously reviewed in this study which outlines Madison’s articulation and elaboration of Merleau-Ponty’s work. Madison (1981) writes: “If he [Merleau-Ponty] speaks of the ‘flesh,’ it is to emphasize the fact that in the very depths of our being, at the roots of our being, we are entirely mixed in with Being; we are gathered up with things into a fabric of Being which is quite literally our own flesh” (p. 177). It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty’s writings come out of the school of philosophy and that he was not formally at least, writing as a theologian or mystic. His insights are aligned with the many great teachings from wisdom traditions which reflect

on the nondual nature of matter and spirit, body and world. As a nondualist might say,

Merleau-Ponty (1968/2000) explains:

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only “shadows stuffed with organs,” that is, more of the visible? The world seen is not “in” my body, and my body is not “in” the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. (p. 138)

Merleau-Ponty’s nondual orientation was apparent in the literature previously reviewed where Madison (1981) comments on the work of Merleau-Ponty: “Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty the flesh is not *matter* nor is it *spirit*. Neither is it nature which is immanent to the spirit nor the spirit present in nature. All of the categories of traditional metaphysics are powerless to describe it, because the flesh is in no wise a *substance*, whether material or spiritual” (p. 176). In this study, the work of Merleau-Ponty greatly shaped the evolution of my own understanding of an integrated, nondual perspective on matter and spirit.

There was a point in the evolution of my understanding about the question—Am I my body or am I not my body? (another way of understanding this question might be to say, “Am I more *truly* matter or spirit?”)—where I began to understand both statements as true, yet also sequential in nature. An early stage in my understanding was that I believed there were two essential stages in spiritual maturation regarding identification with the body. They appeared to be: one, when we first disidentify from the body (often historically referred to as transcendence), before we can then, two, come into the body or re-identify with our fleshly form (which might be called embodiment). While this was my interpretation for much of the study, my understanding continued to evolve as I began to notice the cyclical, dialectic nature of this process. I now see it as an ongoing, lifelong process—transcend, descend; realization of emptiness, the embracing of form; identification with self as spirit, identification with self as an embodied human being. To

take this understanding a step further we might say in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty, flesh is not and never was separate from spirit, for the two are entirely mixed in the same fabric of Being.

Initial lenses outlined in Cycle 2 that pertain to this central interpretation are as follows: (2) *Transcendence or disidentification from one's body (or the realization of the body as impermanent) can produce the feeling of freedom and liberation*; (3) *I am not the body*; (4) *The body is impermanent*; (5) *Spirit, that which animates our fleshly form, is eternal*; (6) *Spirit transcends flesh, meaning spirit encompasses flesh*; (10) *Form, flesh is temporal*; (17) *Transcendence is preferred over the body realm*; and (18) *Awareness exists after death*. It is apparent to me in viewing these lenses together that they represent a struggle with embodiment and illustrate quite a clear resistance to being in the body. This is most obvious in the statement, "Transcendence is preferred over the body realm."

Although it had been communicated to me many times by well-intentioned friends and teachers prior to and during this research that awakening is not about getting up and out of the body, somehow I have struggled to know this in my core. A number of the women in this study also spoke of a kind of reluctant embodiment. I certainly recognize that impulse in myself—a longing to leave this place, the world of flesh and pain and embodiment. I suspect that it was this longing to disembody that largely drew me to this study, and a readiness to explore and gently challenge such a position.

The tendency to experience reluctance toward embodiment, a resistance to truly enter this human realm, is a common occurrence that several women gave voice to. Many women described a stage in their spiritual life where reluctance toward the body or disidentification from the body was privileged over embodiment. The factors that may have contributed to this reluctance varied—sometimes it was a painful childhood, an

intuition or memory of a transcendent realm, the religious doctrine which one was immersed in, cultural messages that led to self-negation of the body, or a simple preference for spiritual realms over human realms. In her study on the lives of 24 female mystics, Ryan (1998) reflects on the body-negation messages experienced in her years in the convent as a Catholic nun when she writes, “Our training was completely lopsided and life-negative, it was completely devoid of any appreciation of the body’s role in spirituality” (p. 332). There were a variety of factors including the influence of the religious tradition one was embedded in that Ryan points out, which seemed to contribute to the experience of reluctant embodiment reported by several of the women in this dissertation. The religious doctrine that one was immersed in also played a role in determining one’s relationship to transcendence for some women.

Living as a Roman Catholic Sister, Catherine experienced a strong preference for the transcendent in the culture with which she lived. She said, “But all the way through it was preached to me, I would imagine, and taught to me, that to be a spiritual person meant that that was much higher than the bodily person. Even as youngsters that was ingrained in us. When I became a religious Roman Catholic Sister, it was even more.” A body negating message that was expounded in religious doctrine and experienced within the Christian culture was described by each of the three Christian participants. In his study on sacred sexuality, Feuerstein (1992) comments on this denial of the body so commonly reported by those in the Christian tradition. From a classic Christian model, Feuerstein suggests that “the body is innately impure and thus is inimical to religious or spiritual life” (p. 15). This body-negative view seen in the Christian tradition is evident too, in the comments by the Anglican priest, Kenneth Leech (as cited in Feuerstein, 1992): “It is through the flesh that salvation comes. And yet so much in Christian

spirituality and Christian life is flesh-denying, flesh-despising, flesh-devaluing. It is head-centered, ponderous, life extinguishing, devoid of passion” (pp. 250-51). Catherine’s early years as a Roman Catholic Sister and her experience of the preference for the transcendent over flesh, appears to be much aligned with the many theologians and historians who have commented extensively on this dynamic within Christianity.

Valerie Vener recalled past lifetimes where she felt trapped by her bodily existence. She described an earlier incarnation where, according to her devotees, she lived as a male Indian ascetic who practiced with intensity, transcending the body. She also described how in this lifetime, her interest is no longer one of transcending her physical form.

Yeshe described her earlier relationship to embodiment as “a semi-reluctant embodiment.” She spoke of a recognition that embodiment was a necessary, though painful reality. Patricia spoke about the need to leave her body in order to survive. This is a process and coping mechanism that many children and also some adults know well, one that in clinical psychology is sometimes understood as *dissociation*. Patricia said, “From the time I was a child, I basically was out of my body a lot, because of the situation that I grew up in. The way that I coped with having a body was to basically live outside of the body, and to some degree deny what my body was.” The coping strategy of leaving one’s body or dissociation is a common theme among people who have experienced various forms of trauma, particularly at a young age. The Jungian psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched (1996) explains dissociation and its relationship to trauma:

The psyche’s normal reaction to a traumatic experience is to withdraw from the scene of injury. If withdrawal is not possible, then a part of the self must be withdrawn, and for this to happen the otherwise integrated ego must split into fragments or *dissociate*. . . . Dissociation is a trick the psyche plays on itself. It allows life to go on by dividing up the unbearable experience and distributing it to different compartments of the mind and body. (pp. 12-13)

In my earlier examination of the literature, a warning toward the tendency to dissociate was suggested by a few spiritual teachers and scholars. On the other hand, Anna raised an important point about what she calls healthy dissociation, which we might also understand as a type of disidentification. In speaking to this phenomenon, Anna suggests:

I think that has sometimes been judged by practitioners who are on the path, the part of leaving one's body or dissociating, or doing a spiritual bypass of some sort. There is an ability that comes—that I believe is part of the work I'm here to do—to, in a healthy way, disembark, dissociate, or disengage temporarily in order to breathe as a spirit without the condensation that the body requires. And then learn to gracefully re-embody, with the awareness of what it is to be expanded.

It seems that there are a variety of factors that influence one's experience of disengaging from the body. For some, this is experienced as a liberating disidentification and for others, it is felt as disconnection or dissociation from the body. Although she does not use the word "dissociation," the feminist writer Susan Wendell (1999) writes about the virtues of transcendence. In the context of her article on feminism, disability, and the transcendence of the body, Wendell suggests there is not only value in ego transcendence, but in the case of people with disabilities and chronic pain, there is also value in the transcendence of the body.

Claire described her difficulty with embodiment in part as a result of the cultural messages we are given as women. Describing the difficulty of remaining in contact with her body, Claire said, "I think my growing edge is in this area, is in terms of really getting that I have a body, because it's very easy for me to forget. What I think I wrestle with is so much at the cultural, social level." In our conversation together, Claire opened up a discussion about culture and the body, especially for women. For most of us it is nearly impossible to escape the cultural critique regarding the standards for a woman's

body. This could be likened to what is known in feminist literature as “the gaze,” a cultural prescription for beauty through which we are conditioned to respond.

Valerie Vener spoke of how different it is for her now that she no longer holds a dualistic thinking about spirit and body as she now recognizes the nondual nature of embodiedness. She said, “This lifetime is very clear—not trapped; I’m in no way removed from myself or absent as I am in this conduit, but as I am being animated, I am that. There’s no longer a separation for me between what lives me and what I am being lived as.” Valerie Vener recalls her movement from an ascetic life to one of awakening fully in this form, being a body:

And so I would practice transcending the body, and not using the body, I would say, limiting the body to very easeful things. I would sit in meditation for hours and hours, and I would only eat raw foods or fluid foods, and no sexuality, very little conversation. I would not use the body very much, so that I could very easily transcend it, and allow the energy to flow freely, and that awakened the upper part of my nervous system very much. But this lifetime I wanted the whole thing to be awake; I wanted the whole thing to buzz. It seemed like a waste of time. If I’m a body, then be a body. And that’s a much more heroic practice.

For a variety of reasons women described a stage in their spiritual evolution which included a strong preference for transcendence. What often followed was a recognition that awakening was incomplete without bringing it into the body or the human realm.

Like Valerie Vener, many participants went on to describe how they eventually came into their bodies, learned to embrace their embodiedness. Women spoke about how they ultimately arrived or claimed their bodies. Through intensive bodywork and therapy that was grounded in the body, Arline said that “[I] became more and more in my body, not in my head.” She spoke of her entire body waking up and participating in life. Arline said, “Every aspect of my body was more awake, more alive, more involved, more concerned.” Patricia commented on how much time it took to eventually “claim” her body. Yeshe explained how through her Dharma practice, her reluctance to be embodied

eventually transformed into a recognition of the preciousness of this human birth. Yeshe said,

Being here, being in the body, being in the human condition on this planet, and having the teachings that we do, I think that has profoundly changed through my Dharma practice and the work that I've done on myself. I've come to a profound appreciation of the preciousness of this situation, and have, for the most part, gotten over my aversion to the situation.

Catherine also described a gradual shift from denying the body to including the body in her theology and spirituality. She spoke of what a “release” it was to view the body as something other than that which “needed to be kept under control and tamed.” A Catholic Sister from the age of 20, Catherine tells the story of how she gradually came to welcome her physicality. This movement in contemporary Christianity toward embodiment was reflected upon in the literature reviewed previously. Through his *Theology of Spirit*, Matthew Fox is a central voice who calls for a melding of spirit and flesh. Fox (1999) reflects:

I wonder how many Christians have been invited to meditate on the fact that the word *carnal* is at the heart of their primary doctrine of *Incarnation*. Our culture, having been poisoned by negative attitudes toward flesh, is ill at ease with this notion. Indeed, a religious faith that claims to believe that “the word was made flesh” actually denigrates flesh and had turned “flesh” over to the pornographic industries rather than sanctifying it and including it in our spiritual practice.
(p. 37)

While Christianity's flesh-denying attitudes are frequently commented on by historians across traditions, a missing link in our common understanding of the spirit-body split in Christianity is offered by Andrew Louth (1997) in his important essay on the body in Western Catholic Christianity. Louth suggests that “Western Catholic Christianity did not start in a vacuum” (p. 111) and that it is all too common to overlook Christianity prior to becoming particularly Western. Louth is referring to the “undivided” Christianity that existed prior to the end of the fourth century, and one that was “predominantly Greek in

language and thought-forms” (p. 111). Louth (1997) points to Plato’s dialogue, the *Timaeus*, as an example of a treatise that expounds the undivided position of the early Christians:

[T]he cosmos is understood on the analogy of the human person, or conversely — and this is how it seemed to Plato — the human person is a copy, reflection, image of the cosmos, which is a living creature endowed with soul and reason . . . The cosmos is seen as a great body, the human being as a little body: and both owe their life and form to indwelling soul and reason. So the human body is seen against the backdrop of the cosmos: it is both a part of it and an encapsulation of the whole. (p. 112)

Referring to the work of Louth, one could say then, that in many important ways Catherine’s reconciliation between body and spirit is, in addition to being a movement toward a more progressive incarnational spirituality, also a *return* to the undivided Christian tradition of the Mediterranean world.

Besides her overall movement toward the body, Catherine commented on the quality of acceptance as it arose in this movement toward bodyliness. She said, “I was accepting myself as I was, little by little. But it was a struggle, as I look at it now. That was a very big movement in my life toward accepting my bodyliness as good. Not as just good, but precious.” Through looking at the process of coming into the body, what is striking is how often the quality of self-acceptance and self-love arose for many women on the journey toward embodiment.

A growing capacity for self-acceptance in relation to one’s body and oneself revealed itself as a common thread which wove its way through a woman’s journey toward embodiment. This capacity for self-acceptance seemed to be a necessary feature for many women in their spiritual maturation. It revealed itself as an ongoing and deepening process that spans across a lifetime, and appeared to help in the facilitation of embodiment. This brings to mind the now famous statement by the transpersonal

psychologist Jack Engler (1986), who was one of the first to coin the phrase that one must first have an ego before one is able to transcend the ego. Engler claims:

From Freud's psychosexual stage-theory to Erikson's life cycle theory to Mahlerian object relations theory, this has been the thrust and aspiration of psychodynamic thought. Part of this thrust has been implicit but not articulated in Buddhist thought. The one tradition has emphasized the importance of becoming somebody; the other, the importance of becoming nobody. As I have come to understand it as a psychologist in both traditions, both a sense of self and a sense of no-self seem to be necessary—in that order—to realize that state of optimal psychological well-being. (p. 51)

As humans, and especially as women who are notoriously critical of our bodies, perhaps we must first love our bodies before we consider an authentic movement toward transcendence. Without a loving regard toward our bodies, I believe we are at great risk of dissociation from our bodies rather than true transcendence which, as Ken Wilber (1995) points out, is a process of *including* that which we transcend.

This process of self-acceptance for women—in terms of accepting her body, finding her voice, or trusting herself—was reflected upon over and over by the women in this study. In discovering this pattern, I considered whether this process of self-acceptance deserved its own interpretive lense. In this study, because I am primarily inquiring into the body, I decided not to develop a separate category for self-acceptance. Rather, this important process is understood and presented as one of the essential underpinnings of a woman's journey toward spiritual wholeness in the body.

Confidence in oneself and one's perceptions is one aspect of self-acceptance that was reflected on by at least one participant. Cara spoke about the importance of having confidence in one's perceptions, this especially being the case for women. Cara said,

This seems to be our task as women. We need to get all of it. Ultimately what we need is for women, for all practitioners, but for women in particular, to be confident in what they're perceiving. I think for women practitioners, they really need confidence in their own consciousness somehow, that unfolding, confidence in what they're actually perceiving.

While Cara spoke to the importance of confidence, Anna described how she trusts and follows internal guidance. She named this guidance as “the internal source” which she said “gives me much more fortitude to withstand the huge gusts of wind that come from the outer world of expectations and presumptions and needs.” In addition to confidence and trust, another aspect of self-acceptance that was mentioned includes recognizing oneself and one’s body as holy. Claire described this dimension of self-acceptance:

I was asked, “Is God in sex?” As I was thinking about the question, I said, “You know, what this question really is, is about self-acceptance. Is God in your own body? Because if you get that it’s not a question of because you remember God that God is present. If you accept your own body, if you get that you are the Christ, then whatever you’re doing, whether it’s eating or drinking or making love, you are not separated from that.”

It seems that an environment of self-acceptance and self-love helps provide fertile soil for women to claim their bodies and recognize that they are made in the likeness of God.

Theresa reflected on the evolution of her regard toward herself and her body. She talked about how today, she would be less “harsh” on herself than in past years. Theresa explained, “Because I think my life, my body, who I am is given to God, and to this community. I’m very human, and I’m glad. All of it has made me who I am, and I love that. I love who I am, and I’m sorry for the shame I have dealt myself.” It seems that this practice of self-love is crucial for women so as not to live in an inner environment of self rejection.

Theresa reflected on loving her body and loving her self. She spoke about how this is a process in which she is still involved. This points to the suggestion that self-love and self-acceptance is an ongoing and deepening process that continues through one’s lifetime. Theresa spoke about the process of self-love and how she contacts the holy through her body: “But I do love my self. I think I have a ways to go in that. Again, when

I'm kind of my truer self, that's where I am. But the easiest way for me to lose touch with even *the holy*, is to lose touch with my body." Claire, too, reflected on an ongoing process of recognizing herself, her embodiment, as an expression of divinity when she said, "I come back to that resurrection experience. If you get that: Where is Christ consciousness? Where is Buddha nature? Where is the divine? *Claire*. Then you don't have that separation, where this is okay and that's not okay. That's the kind of the fullness that I'm hoping to move even more into." Catherine described beautifully her recognition of the importance of embodiment when she said, "I'd say today I see the body as the only way we can live and go to God, because that's who we are. We are embodied people." Catherine's comments bring to mind those of Fox's and his impassioned call for a return to the flesh:

It is time for this ambivalence toward flesh to cease. Either flesh is sacred or it is not. Either the divine is present, *incarnated* (which literally means "made flesh"), or it is not. If it is, it is time that worship and education became enfleshed, incarnated, in order to provide a proper home (*eikos*) for the Divine, which is clearly biased in favor of flesh, having, after all, made it. (Fox, 1999, p. 37)

Catherine's description of moving from a theology which denied the flesh to a theology and an inner experience which celebrates the flesh and the world typifies a common shift that many women in this study described as part of their spiritual evolution.

Once the body has been reclaimed, some women described how then there exists a movement back and forth between transcendence and embodiment. Patricia describes her evolution of being outside of the body, and then discovering the body again, and how in order to do that, she said, "I needed to pull in an understanding of a larger identity, which you might term transcendence. Then once I had the possibility of a larger identity, then it made it okay to come back and start working on myself." This process is reflective of the dialectic suggested earlier—one of disidentification with the body, re-

identification, and again disidentification with the body. Rose recalled an ancient alchemical process that describes this ongoing dialectic when she said, “that the process is one of separating spirit from matter. Purifying, if you will. And then bringing spirit back into matter in a much more conscious way. That’s an ongoing process, it’s actually a life process.” Anna reflected on how she understands this movement between spirit and body when she said, “That’s part of the spiritual path, for me at least, to wake up to that truth, that there is a spirit who is different than the body—and who is also the same, also embodied and co-existent. Let that consciousness develop the muscle to both separate and converge.” Anna continued by explaining the importance of the realization of spirit and how that realization is then integrated into the body. She said, “From my local standpoint, it’s the waking up that I am a spirit in a body which comes first, as opposed to I am just a local me, an ego or a personality or a body. Then what happened for me is the spirit starts to reintegrate back into the body, and starts to re-associate with, I am this body.”

The process of claiming and accepting ourselves and our bodyliness, and at times disidentifying from our form, only to re-identify even more deeply with our fleshly expression of spirit, is cyclical, ongoing, and dialectic in nature. Anna suggests that this process is one of releasing attachment and then reattaching. She suggests that “the challenges of re-embodiment have been letting go of false associations with what I really am, and then adopting them again. But as a player, rather than being confined by the role.” Like Anna, Rose seems to be able to hold both ends of the spectrum—transcendence and embodiedness—with fluidity and a lightness of being. She said,

I think there needs to be a piece of, “I am not the body,” because this culture is so materialistic that we define people by their bodies. Particularly we define women

by their bodies. I think part of a woman's aging process has to do with recognizing that she's not decorative. She's not just her body. The identity to some degree shifts more to spiritual. But I think it's really important to also own the aging body.

I do wear makeup and I do get my hair colored. I make choices based on what I find aesthetically pleasing to me, but I'm not trying to turn the clock back. I'm not trying for my body to be any different from how it is. It's healthy, it works, it goes to a gym every day and reads murder mysteries to stay on treadmills. I like to eat, I like to sleep well, and I like to get a massage. I enjoy all of the sins of the flesh, if you will. But I also know it's not what's essential for my being in my life.

Rose described a willingness to simultaneously realize herself as "not the body" while truly embracing the ordinary human dimensions of life as a woman in our culture, which for her, includes makeup, treadmills, and murder mysteries.

Patricia too, spoke to an understanding of transcendence. She talked about looking in the mirror and being under the illusion that the body reflected back to us is truly who we are, and a recognition that it is not our true self. Patricia said, "Your body certainly expresses you. It certainly is a vehicle for your spirit. But it isn't who you are, whatever that means." Arline also elaborated on the importance of being less identified with the body as she reflected on where she is currently in her life cycle:

I feel like I'm in a chapter now where a lot of my work is to dissolve that ego and to be less firmly identified with this body, even though this body is completely essential to do the work of this lifetime. And it's the house for this mind. Nevertheless, this body is not me. It's not 'I,' and I have much less solid sense of that identity than I ever did. I keep working on it. It's a very, very, very strong imprint. But it's necessary to loosen that, and let go of that identification if one is to get fully enlightened. So I developed ways of working with that identification because it seems very relevant to me—the notion of relative and ultimate. Many things exist on two levels simultaneously, relative and ultimate, and they are both true. They are equally valid.

Arline's story is an example of how some women hold the relative and absolute. Body and spirit are in a fluid dance, where at times identification with the body is leading, while in other moments disidentification with form takes the lead. In this dance neither position is ultimately privileged.

During Cycles 1 and 2 of this study, I think I still really privileged transcendence over embodiment. That is odd though, because most people who know me would probably describe me as a fairly embodied person: I feel good in my body; I like to move my body; I enjoy knowing strength through my body; I am alive in my body; I am a pretty sensual person. Like Yeshe said, however, my experience is that this whole embodiment process is difficult and has been very painful at times. I am sure that has had something to do with my longing to get out of here, to leave this body. This preference for the unembodied realm was illustrated in my list of initial lenses in Cycle 2, when I stated one of them as “Transcendence is preferred over the body realm.” I would actually have to say that I no longer feel that to be true. I am convinced that I am here to be this body, to cherish the divine expression that is me. This is a new experience.

This whole area of identification with the body, or *embodiment*, and disidentification with the body, or *transcendence*, has been for me at times a fairly confusing aspect of this study. It also happens to be at the very heart of this study. Part of what has been confusing is an unclarity regarding the meaning of these terms—in the literature, during my interviews, and most certainly in myself. For instance, to dissociate from one’s body can look an awful lot like disidentification from the body. I think these two experiences, transcendence and dissociation, quite possibly are often more intertwined within one experience than we realize. For example, I think the energetic opening that I went through and documented (Appendix A) some years back, certainly had a healthy dose of dissociation woven through the experience, though I would not reduce it to a purely dissociative one. Even then, there are those like Anna who speak to the importance of dissociation, and Wendell (1999) who defends “strategies of disembodiment of the self” (p. 332). It is tricky, this idea or experience of transcending the

body. To realize on some fundamental level that I am not only my body is not the same as checking out of my body, though it may have some of the same features. However, even “checking out of the body” may serve an important role in early development (especially where trauma is involved) and perhaps even in later spiritual development. An important point of discernment then, might be to understand the motivation behind dissociation or transcendence.

Through this whole dissertation process—spiraling in and out of texts, inquiring, spiraling in and out again, inquiring—I have come to understand and believe that to either try to leave this body or get too solidly fixed in this body can both result in partial truths. Cara described how many spiritual traditions historically do not include the body in this process of awakening. She said,

Many spiritual traditions aren't interested in embodiment at all in this way. The body is seen as an obstacle to realization. The “I am the body” idea and conviction is what blocks the soul from realizing the truth and source of her deeper nature. Certainly the deepest realization of ourselves, our deepest identity, is beyond the manifest world. But I often contemplate Ramana Maharshi's idea that each blade of grass, each insect and animal, and I would say each organ and cell of the body, has a desire and right to realize its true nature, has a right to participate in the self-realization of being. Nothing needs to be left behind in the great sweep of enlightening.

To live a vibrant, fleshy, yet spacious existence is both to realize the nondual, essential nature of emptiness (to know God, taste Oneness, to recognize the primordial ground of being that is beyond time and space), *and then to bring that realization in, down, and through my body*. This is a lifelong process. It may take the form of bringing an expanded awareness, a sense of the Divine into every aspect of life including relationships; sexuality; the cells and bones and blood and breath of our bodies; parenting; and even politics. This lifelong process is essentially one of bringing presence into the flesh so that

the fleshy body can awaken in each cell, resulting in a cellularly awake transformational vehicle that is our very own self.

Articulating a nondual perspective on the body and spirit which *joins* each element rather than setting them apart from one another, Anna explains:

Initially there is a greater distinction between the concept of the body and the spirit, the ordinary and the profound. That's more important at the beginning of the journey, I believe, because it involves elements of differentiation, to establish the understandings of each, and the influences of each. But later there is more of a blending, still of distinct elements, but more of a confluence between aspects of life, higher and lower, spirit and body, truth and its expression, and they aren't so different, but rather more on the continuum of life, each waiting for their own stage of ripening to surrender to the beginning edges of the next layer.

Anna's reflections on her understanding of body and spirit as a process of blending brings to mind Madison's commentary on the work of Merleau-Ponty. In particular, Madison (1981) says that "we are entirely mixed in with Being; we are gathered up with things into a fabric of Being which is quite literally our own flesh" (p. 177). Like Madison and Merleau-Ponty, Anna is pointing to the mixing and blending of spirit and body, being and flesh.

Cara articulated the importance of deconstructing notions of the body. She questioned the use of language which points to something that we assume we know what we are talking about, when actually we do not even know what body is. Cara invites us to inquire into what is possible when we dissolve fixed and solid notions of the body:

I think of it [the body] often as a precious vehicle of consciousness, a mysterious form that is in every way the perfect vehicle and expression of true nature, and the perfect form for the Soul to experience her fruition and fullness. So the body isn't a thing at all. It can be both an expression of the constriction and pain in our souls and it can express the luminous and transparent nature of our deeper reality, and often at the same time. So we can experience it on a continuum from a very dense rubbery, kind of heavy locked up substance, to vastly different substances. It's a mysterious substance of potentiality. Just thinking about it and talking about it always makes me feel what a blessing it is to have this precious human body!

It is an exciting possibility to consider ultimately releasing any notion of what the body is or is not—continually releasing notions of both embodiment and transcendence—and inquire into the nature of reality as it expresses itself through this human form that is my very own flesh. In his exhaustive study on the body, Michael Murphy (1992) points to a possible *future body*. Referring to physical transfiguration as it is described in the Christian doctrine of the glorified body and Taoist legends of holy flesh, Murphy suggests: “Though such legends and doctrines need not be taken literally, they might intuitively anticipate the extraordinary life humans could one day enjoy” (p. 201). Murphy’s suggestion is similar to that of Cara’s when she articulated her vision of the future body.

The possibilities for further research in these areas of the body—the enlightened body or future body—are endless, especially as technology continues to evolve at a dizzying speed, and also as we continue to advance as a culture, spiritually. This is an exciting area of research—science and mysticism as it relates to the body—that is flourishing through the work of scholars such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991); Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, and Vince Rause (2001); and Antonio Damasio (1999).

New Lenses: Tricksters & Surprises Result in Unexpected Interpretations

Childhood Experiences, from Visions to Trauma, Serve as a Catalyst for Spiritual Sensitivity in the Body

The connection between childhood experiences—of spiritual intuitions and visions, as well as childhood trauma—in relationship to adult spirituality is certainly not a new area of exploration. Perhaps then, it should not have been too surprising to find that most of the women in this study spoke of childhood experiences that appeared to have played a role in their later spiritual development and sensitivity in the body. However,

this was one of those cases when I was surprised, not dramatically, but modestly surprised by these findings. During Cycles 1 and 2, I did not consciously reflect on how childhood spiritual experiences or childhood trauma would impact a woman's later relationship to her body. Therefore, in my initial articulation of the lenses in Cycle 2, I did not include any lenses that explicitly pointed to this area. I did, however, in my interviews ask a brief question about family of origin prior to the start of the formal interview questions. It is only very recently that I have reflected much on how my own predilection for leaving this world might have its seeds in my own childhood trauma.

While not always included in the portion of the transcript that was printed in this dissertation, half of the women in the study reported experiences of childhood trauma that ranged from sexual or violent abuse to neglect. Over half of the participants also described childhood intuitions, in the form of spontaneous movements, insights, energetic experiences in the body, and visions. In their extensive research on the spiritual life of women, Anderson and Hopkins (1991) found:

As we listened to the women we interviewed for this book describe their childhoods, the poetic observation that it is “not in entire forgetfulness and not in utter nakedness” that we come into this life began to have the ring of an empirical truth. Most of the women we spoke with told us that it was in childhood that they had had their first encounter with the divine. And in most cases they described it as a direct connection with something inside themselves that they knew to be absolutely real—no matter what their parents or peers might say to the contrary.

How and when this initial connection—or recollection—occurred, whether it was felt in the body as an infusion of energy or light, or took the form of a dialogue with angels, the ability to see auras, or an experience in nature, depended on a multitude of factors as various as the women themselves. (pp. 24-25)

One way of understanding children's relationship to spirituality then, is to consider the possibility that, as Anderson and Hopkins (1991) suggest, childhood spirituality is more of a remembrance than a discovery. Perhaps ancient yogic poses, energy, and spiritual knowledge are available to us all of the time, maybe even housed in our cellular structure

(Murphy, 1992). Children, with their open boundaries and permeable sense of self, may be especially available to such intuition, energies, wisdom, and knowledge. For example, Patricia described a type of knowing that she had as a child. Given that as an adult she makes her living as a highly respected intuitive counselor, it seems likely that these early intuitive seeds were showing themselves to Patricia when she was a child.

Christian mystic and visionary Hildegard of Bingen, who lived from 1098 to 1179, describes a powerful childhood vision that was to later become the foundation of her spiritual awareness. In a letter to the monk Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard, at the age of 77, recalls a vision of light which she called the *umbra viventis lucis*, the reflection of the living Light (Newman, 1987). Hildegard writes:

From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves, and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time, when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. (Newman, 1987, p. 6)

Like in the case of Hildegard, it is common to read in the stories of mystics and saints, early childhood spiritual knowledge and experiences. Yeshe described a vision and powerful shift in consciousness that she experienced as a child and like many children, it was one that she did not reveal to the adults in her life:

I had an experience of my body moving through light blue space, moving through the earth, and the earth was like a white round sphere. I was moving through seven different white spheres of the earth, and it was all made of light. And my body, it was more like my consciousness, and my body consciousness was moving directly up through all these spheres of light. I lost ordinary consciousness completely.

Yeshe also described feeling “the Holy spirit entering me through the Communion.” She spoke of other divine experiences that were opened in her young body, through being in church:

I would have things that I would feel physically. I guess you would call them kind of experiences of the divine, in church. Especially, I think, because I sang in the choir for many years. We did a lot of Gregorian and other kinds of chanting, and I have a devotional nature. I think if you have a devotional nature and you do devotional singing, it actually does something with your body and mind that opens you up to actually having experiences of what we could call the sacred or divine.

Yeshe’s early experiences of the divine bring to mind other female mystics who have documented similar experiences historically. In her autobiography, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1898/1989), who lived from 1873 to 1897, recalls an experience of the divine that occurred at the young age of 14:

One Sunday when I was looking at a picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I saw the blood coming from one of His hands, and I felt terribly sad to think that It was falling to the earth and that no one was rushing forward to catch It. I determined to stay continually at the foot of the Cross and receive It. I knew that I should then have to spread It among other souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross—“I am thirsty”—rang continually in my heart and set me burning with a new, intense longing. I wanted to quench the thirst of my Well-Beloved and I myself was consumed with a thirst for souls. I was concerned not with the souls of priests but with those of great sinners which I wanted to snatch from the flames of hell.
(p. 63)

Perhaps these early experiences of the divine created mystical seeds in these women that would one day flourish into ripe wisdom and spiritual intelligence. It certainly seems the case that women who are deeply devoted to spirit, such as the women in this study, often report sensitivity to spirit that was apparent as early as childhood.

Growing up Roman Catholic, pre-Vatican II, had a deep impact on how Claire understood the relationship of spirit and flesh. She described how spirit shaped her thinking and knowing so that “the other realm was as real as this tangible realm.” Claire described her relationship with the realm of angels when she spoke about going to bed at

night. She said that her mom told her if she should fall asleep before finishing the rosary “the angels would finish it for me. And I absolutely believed that. The realm of the angels was as real to me as flesh and blood.” Also describing the importance of both ritual in the Catholic Church and her relationship to Mary, Claire said, “During Lent, we’d walk in and the crucifix would be covered in a purple cloth, and all the statues would be covered in purple cloths for the entire time of Lent. We would do Stations of the Cross. For me, Mary was very important. She was flesh and blood, and the agony of losing her son I felt, as a little tiny girl.” It seems that the richly textured ritual found in the church deeply impressed many young girls. Claire continued,

During May, we would process and crown Mary with flowers. I would go and pick flowers from my garden and weave them together with wire and make these crowns, and then we would have these processions. Now, with hindsight, they were the goddess; they were the fertility; they were all of that. So it was a real gift to me, and it was so important in setting that foundation of the feminine, the divine feminine.

Describing a natural affinity for inquiring into the body, Cara said, “As a child, I had many early experiences where I’d naturally be contemplating the body, and try to see in the body, and wondered about what was in the body, and why I couldn’t just look in the body.” Cara also talked about her lived experience of the body as a young girl:

As a young child I would love to go on vacation to wooded areas. Scrambling around rocks, I would feel all these various animals and creatures in me, and I’d make up games that involved those. Yoga poses, especially twists and inverted poses, came naturally. There was just this alive moving interest and awareness that I had, and I had a somewhat controlling mother, so it got bound up a lot.

Valerie Vener also reflected on her early relationship to energy and movement that seemed to arise out of a deep internal knowing. She said, “I started this lifetime experiencing the body very freely, very aware that I was energy, everything was energy, and that my job was to open as energy in energy.” Valerie Vener described spontaneously putting herself in yogic poses to facilitate the movement of energy through her. Also

describing spiritual insight experienced through the body, the former Carmelite nun, Bernadette Roberts, told Anderson and Hopkins (1991) about an event that occurred for her at the age of 5. Roberts said, "I was on my way to play with some kids when suddenly I experienced a powerful fusion from within—like the blowing up of a balloon. It was the infusion of an unknown power, energy or presence" (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991, p. 25). As in the case of Bernadette Roberts, and for the women in this study, it is possible that these experiences—of intuitions, visions, energies, movements, and shifts in consciousness—both served to catalyze a spiritual sensitivity in these young girls, as well as being expressions of a childhood spirituality in and of themselves.

Childhood trauma—various forms of abuse, neglect, and loss—also impacted the unfolding of many women's spirituality and healing. Arline expressed how this journey of sexual trauma eventually led to many years of healing work and therapy, which ultimately served as her entry point into spirituality. Arline said,

During this period of time I first explored feelings I had suppressed about being sexually molested by three different men, over a period of 10 years. Two were relatives, one a neighbor. I was unable to tell my mother and this led to further confused feelings. While it is fortunate I was not raped, nonetheless the inappropriate fondling and secrecy surrounding it certainly shaped my behavior for decades to come.

Janet Adler too, described how deeply the early trauma she experienced informed much of her later spiritual unfolding:

I was ill the whole first year of my life, and couldn't digest foods. I was put in the hospital at thirteen months by a doctor who was not a kind person. He was supposedly the "best pediatrician in the state of Indiana." But this man, really, I think was quite soul-less, and heartless in his treatment of infants and children.

I was tied down. I was force fed. I was not allowed to see my mother, or any other person in my little life for six weeks. I was abandoned.

While many children leave their body during painful experiences, Janet Adler had the opposite experience: "I imagine I would have had more fluidity in moving in and out of

other realms as a child, if I hadn't somehow been hurled out for reasons of survival during the hospital trauma. I wasn't one of these children that was full of fantasies and inner experiences that would take me away. I stayed in my body." Janet Adler said, "The experience of premature separation, psychologically, and then the physical pain—I think those two things happening probably made me more sensitive in terms of the nervous system which I already had." Valerie Vener too, described the intense need that arose after losing her mother at a very young age. Her mother died of breast cancer when she was just fourteen. Reflecting on this loss, Valerie Vener said, "I was very emotionally disturbed by that. There was this unbelievable need for her, and the immediate realization that it was not going to be met—this need." Severe childhood wounding is so often reported by people who eventually turn toward spirituality. It seems that, as Janet Adler suggests, the nervous system may become hyper-sensitized through wounding or trauma, and that this may especially open a person to spiritual experiences as an adult.

Given the findings expressed through this lens, it is possible that young children naturally have an openness in the psyche, soul, and body that can be a source of great wisdom, imagination, and spiritual delight. This intuitive bodily knowing often shuts down over time due to a variety of factors including trauma, and the cultural pressure to block out such non-ordinary realities. It is also possible, however, that the experience of trauma may actually open one to spiritual realities. In other words, because trauma disrupts the development of a solid self structure and sometimes results in dissociation, or at least a permeable and porous sense of self, a necessity to leave the body is often developed. Because of this, those who have experienced trauma may have an especially fluid access to spiritual realms. This is in contrast to those who have a more solid self structure, who may have to work harder to access those same realms. Through reflecting

on the stories of the women in this study, it seems that trauma can often result in both a tendency to dissociate from the body, as well as to have a hyper-sensitivity in the body and nervous system. This highly sensitive nervous system due to early trauma, or simply a childhood openness to energetic phenomena, are common precursors to energetic and spiritual openings in the body later in life.

The Body Serves as a Barometer, where Intuition Becomes Physicalized

What is most apparent about this particular lens—the body serving as a place for intuition to become physicalized—is the sympathetic resonance I experienced during the interviews when this theme would arise. It is as if my body was having the experience of recognition through the body, when the content of conversation turned to “intuition becoming physicalized.” This was an exciting discovery that truly felt like a knowing I had in my body, one that I previously had relied upon often as a source of information. But it was not until the interpretive process began in Cycle 3 that I consciously recognized this fact.

As a psychotherapist, I have many times reflected on how often I use my body to tell me what is going on in the consulting room with a patient. I listen to my body and let it guide me, allow it to give me additional information about what may not be being spoken, especially regarding emotions or the unconscious. I have come to trust what my body tells me. Not that it is always accurate, but far more often than not I have found it to tell the truth about a situation. It was striking then, to hear many of the women in the study language a similar knowledge. This was one of those lenses I did not articulate from the beginning, nor did I consciously seek to probe this area through my interview questions. Yet, I experienced deep and immediate internal resonance with each woman,

as they described this phenomenon. I recognized this lens, at least in part, because I share a similar life experience.

Rose described this phenomenon: “When I sit with somebody in meditation I process through my body, which is how I process things, what’s going on in their bodies.” While Yeshe put it this way:

My body gives me information about people, when I teach meditation or meet with people individually, I will pick up what’s going on. I won’t get pain or sick, but I will know where peoples’ mind states are by the information my body’s giving me. I use that in my teaching, because I can tell when there’s anxiety in the room, or all kinds of different things.

Describing how sometimes this kind of information can feel like a burden, Maya articulated how this somatic knowledge is not something one can simply turn off:

So that as I am talking to you, I’m being affected by you. It’s not just up in my head. I am feeling it in my body, and my body is talking to me about this interaction. My body does not lie to me about what’s going on. I will have a skin sensation that is holding the truth. You could say my intuition is physicalized. I walk in a room and my skin will tell me the subtext of what’s being said by people’s heads. The conscious mind is saying what is socially correct, or what is required, and my skin hears the whispering underneath. Which is very difficult sometimes. I’ve had situations where I’ve just wanted to scream and say, “We can’t keep doing this! This is false! This does not feel right! You’re pretending!”

According to these women, a tremendous amount of knowledge is available to us if we are able to listen to what Maya calls the “whispering” of the skin. Valerie Vener understands her body to be a barometer that is best utilized when free from obstruction. She said, “Transcendence for me is actually allowing the body to be freely without interference. So it’s an extraordinary barometer for me, the body. How I am being conducted, energetically, and how that conductivity is then in relationship to other forms of light via the body became just so exquisite to me.” Valerie’s reference to the body as a “barometer” brings to mind a piece of literature that was reviewed in an earlier chapter of this dissertation. Anderson and Hopkins (1991) write of one woman who says, “I could

tune my body as a huge cosmology of energies, with lattices of light stretching into other lattices of light. Gradually I learned that there isn't anything about our bodies that is not this antenna, this tuning fork for the divine" (p. 192). Similarly, Theresa illustrates how she learns from the wisdom of her body by slowing down enough to pick up "the biggest hints" about what is going on because it shows up in her body. Theresa said, "My body does tell me who I truly am." What all of these women have in common is a willingness and capacity to listen to the body and pay attention to the wisdom which comes through our cellular structure.

Another form of intuition is expressed by Catherine who came to challenge the notion of the world as bad, in part by how this showed up in her body. Catherine said, "The world was good, I mean, I just felt that in my bones. The world, meaning people, creation, everything, was good and God-given. So it was reading and my own gut reaction to things that I had to admit was part of this. I couldn't buy into, totally, a negation kind of approach to the world." In this case it was Catherine's intuition through the body that helped her find her way back to the world, and her body. Rather than imposing a belief onto the body, Cara echoed this willingness to let the body inform us of its nature. She said at the beginning of our interview, "I don't usually think of giving meaning to my experience so much as letting the body tell me what its nature is. Letting it reveal its nature to me and that is an ongoing and deepening process." Just think what is possible—the vast wisdom, intelligence, and vitality that is waiting to be unearthed, excavated—if only we listen, and even respond to the voice of the body.

This lens points to one of the essential qualities or dimensions of intuition itself—listening through our bodies. In his extensive research on the body, Murphy (1992) documents many of the ways in which we receive information through our bodies,

which he calls some of the “metanormalities of everyday life” (p. 53). Under this heading he includes *perception of external events* such as “feeling that someone is watching you, after which you turn to meet his or her gaze” (p. 54); *somatic awareness and self-regulation* such as “determining by spontaneous tastes or smells your level of stress during extreme exertion” (p. 55); and *communication abilities* such as “feeling the pains of a distant friend, then discovering he or she is ill or injured” (p. 55). What I am naming in this study as “intuition becoming physicalized” is similar in ways to the ancient understanding of *siddhis*, or various forms of clairvoyance and special powers which are historically afforded to mystics. Murphy (1992) elaborates on this phenomenon:

This extrasomatic sensitivity . . . is metanormal or extraordinary, by the definition used here, when it is largely freed from distortion and is made accessible to conscious control. That it does indeed occur is indicated by much lore of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist yoga. For example, among the *siddhis* produced by yogic practice, it is said, there exist some by which we can perceive the smallest particles of matter, either inside or outside the body. (p. 91)

In our modern culture we have traveled so far away from this type of *connection to and perception through* our bodies, that it often seems surprising to realize that we have learned something through our skin, before it makes its way first to our mind. Perhaps being aware of this lens—that I, too, did not even bring into consciousness until this final cycle of interpretation—will help bring this body wisdom we have into the foreground.

Transformation of the Body Occurs on a Cellular Level

What exactly it means to transform on a cellular level I am still discovering. What is clear though, is that an energetic transformation that is felt to have physical components—a cellular transformation—does seem to accompany the awakening process for most women in this study. For several women this process was described as a movement from density to light or spaciousness. This cellular transformation often is felt as a release of blockages in the body, or energies being released in the body. This process

sometimes unfolds with ease, yet in other instances it is described as a difficult and often harsh process, especially where the immune and nervous system are concerned. There appear to be a variety of types of changes that occur at a cellular level, some more dramatic and others more subtle. Some participants described looking younger or simply different as they went through such a transformation. For others, changes may be less apparent to the outside observer as they are occurring at a subtle or energetic level, with little or no external correlates.

The fact is, from a purely biological standpoint, we are constantly being re-created on a cellular level. The scholar of body, emotion, and consciousness, Antonio Damasio (1999) reminds us of this fact:

We are not perishable at the end of our lives. Most parts of us perish during our lifetime only to be substituted by other perishable parts. The cycles of death and birth repeat themselves many times in a life span—some of the cells in our bodies survive for as little as one week, most for not more than one year. (p. 144)

The implications of what it means to transform on a cellular level are vast for they might include everything from basic cellular regeneration as Damasio (1999) points out; to the Catholic doctrines of the Glorified Body and accounts of shamanic journeys through matter, which scholars such as Murphy (1992) document at length; to the reports of light and emptiness entering the body and the freeing of blockages, which are described by women in this study.

Through a variety of body therapies, Arline described how blockages that were previously interfering with intelligence pouring through her body began to dissolve: “Feeling cellular experiences. Having memories flood up, or feelings of rightness and normality in the particular area. This was information and intelligence that was blocked to me before.” Rose reflected, too, on the ways in which the body opens and relaxes. She said, “Somebody recently said to me, you just keep getting younger every year. I think

there is something of the relaxation, of the not taking on an image of aging. I think it's that aliveness that begins to enter the body, to stay in the body, and it becomes magnetic not from youth but from consciousness." Yeshe echoed this when she said, "I believe that in spiritual development there's actually a transformation that happens in the body, in terms of the whole cellular structure; and in the subtle body, the whole system of subtle channels and chakras." Yeshe elaborated on how this happens:

The integration of emptiness into the body is actually a whole process. It's hard to kind of remember and put it in perspective, when you've been doing intense spiritual practice a long time. I realize that it's been like that for me for so long, that I don't even think about it, that is: thinking of my body *as* light, experiencing it as light and space, rather than as a dense kind of form.

As a Tibetan Buddhist, Yeshe did a traditional 3-year retreat and she commented on how that impacted her on a body level. Yeshe used words such as "reborn" and "glowing" and "lighter" to describe how her body changed throughout the extended period of meditation.

Intensive retreats such as the Tibetan Buddhist 3-year retreat that Yeshe took part in is often said to produce a variety of types of transformation. The Indian ecstatic Sri Ramakrishna for example, who lived from 1836 to 1886, is said to have experienced a number of bodily changes as a result of his ascetic practices. While Ramakrishna was worshipping Rama he took on the form of Hanuman, the monkey from the Ramayana, and in doing this he reported such bodily changes as his spine growing in length by half an inch (Murphy, 1992). Reflecting on her body at the completion of the 3-year Tibetan retreat, Yeshe reported, "My body felt like I was 3 years old again. I could run like I was 3 years old again. Literally, my body felt—now I didn't notice any of this until I was out of the retreat—my body felt very, very different than it had, much lighter. It actually felt glowing." Changes in the body such as the experience of light opening up in the body

was a common description among the women in this study, as a way of pointing to how awakening takes place on a cellular level.

Arline is convinced that “cellular knowledge exists in each cell. A nerve cell has the knowledge of reproducing another nerve cell.” Through deep tissue bodywork, meditation, experiences in water, and drug experiences, Arline had “cellular memory” arise. Reflecting on these experiences, she said, “It’s given me a firm conviction from personal experience that there’s a cellular memory.” Yeshe described the process by which cellular change happens: “In terms of the cellular change, it has a lot to do with the experience of light in the body. I used to have as a teenager and in my 20s, the feeling of a lot of darkness in my body. Doing a lot of purification practices with prayer, light, and mantra, I started to open up into a lot of light just manifesting in the body.” It is an exciting area of consideration to contemplate the implications of bringing more energy into the body, more light and space into the flesh.

The Buddhist scholar and spiritual teacher Reginald Ray (2001) describes how in Tibetan Buddhism the “ultimate fruition of the practice of *thögal*” (p. 323)—*thögal* is defined as *passing over the summit*—“is the attainment of the rainbow body (*ja lü*), a body of pure energy. When a realized dzokchen practitioner is about to die, his or her physical body dissolves into light. In such cases, the physical body vanishes, shrinking in size until only the hair and nails remain, as indicators of the process that has occurred” (p. 323). This phenomena is called *the rainbow body* because as the person’s body is vanishing, it dissolves into a variety of colored lights or energies, each corresponding to the particular element (earth, water, fire, air, space) from which it arose (Ray, 2001). In addition to this phenomena in Tibetan Buddhism, the experience of light in the body and other related phenomena that may appear with religious devotion, is reported by other

traditions as well. Murphy (1992) documents extraordinary somatic phenomenon recognized by Catholic authorities such as, “*Mystical aureoles and illuminations*, especially during ecstasy or contemplation, which is considered to be an anticipation of the Glorified Body” (p. 483). Additional charismatic phenomena—or cellular transformation—recognized by Catholic authorities and listed in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, include the following:

Incendium amoris, burning sensations in the body without apparent cause. These include interior heat, usually a sensation around the heart, which gradually extends to other parts of the body; intense ardors (when the heat becomes unbearable and cold applications must be used); and material burning that scorches clothing or blisters the skin. *Stigmata*, the spontaneous appearance of wounds and bleeding that resemble the wounds of Christ. *Tears of blood and bloody sweat (hematidrosis)*, the effusion of blood from the eyes, as in weeping, or from pores of the skin. (Murphy, 1992, p. 483)

For several women in the study, cellular transformation often initially happened in a dramatic and difficult fashion. Cara described how an enormous amount of energy opened her and that as a result of this extreme shift in consciousness, her body and nervous system was “fairly destroyed.” She said, “Given that I was unprepared for the opening and the immensity of the energy that was set loose in my organism, it fairly destroyed my body, my nervous system, as well as my organ energy.” After this immense opening, Cara went through a very long healing journey. Anna described how it is the Mother, Divine spirit, who also performs the healing of the body on a cellular level. Anna articulated how this process occurs:

She [the Mother] cleanses, and the light will go wherever it needs to go to heal you next. And if your intention as a spirit is to really embody, it will go into your body. The energy of awakening, when She is in her individualized preeminent form, it's just She. It's an identity that moves through with consciousness and intelligence and purpose. The light of being, call it that. Then it starts to balance, and goes in whatever opposite directions it needs to reclaim and adjust the polarities. Cleansing, clearing, creating more space, releasing fears, and expanding the opportunities. Expanding the opportunities means, for me, releasing the attachment to old identities. And yet willingness to embody into

them again at any moment, that's the trick. There is a cellular cleansing. It's a very palpable experience. It feels like a knitting between, an enmeshment, an intertwining between the etheric body, and when spirit finds that, it's a done deal. Because then the physical body can be healed, as well as the energy bodies. The cells start to wash and cleanse. You can feel probings. It's the energy of light literally probing through the brain, through the cellular structure, and the bones, muscles, organs—the flesh.

It is awe-inspiring to consider the healing that is possible if only, as Anna suggests, we open to the Divine and let her probe and cleanse our very being which includes our bones, muscles, fleshy tissue, and even etheric body. One way to think about transformation and healing on a cellular level—a process many of these women are proposing—is to really consider the implications of bringing presence into our bodies, enlightening our very cellular structure.

Being Embodied is a Choiceful Act

This lens represents for me one of the more surprising discoveries in this research, the notion that being embodied is a choiceful act. Another way of explaining this lens is that it is often our will to be alive, to be embodied, that keeps us here in our fleshy form. Because this is an example of a lens that at first confused and then surprised me, and certainly was unexpected, it falls under the heading of new lenses, one of the more dramatically new ones.

Prior to this study, and even after the interpretive Cycles 1 and 2 of this research, I did not consciously consider the possibility of being embodied as a choiceful act. I was aware, however, of distantly related themes such as the importance of contemplating death; or that there was value (though I've certainly been ambivalent on this one) inherent in being embodied. But I would not have imagined that it is in part our will or choice to be here that keeps us alive. As reflected upon in previous discussions on hermeneutics, it is my very life experience that allows me to see certain themes like this

one in the first place. Therefore, while I was not consciously aware of this theme playing itself out in my life, still, the material—and the lenses that are brought forth from the text—would not be recognizable without my own life experience. This is the dialectic dance of intuitive inquiry. It is analogous to an unfolding conversation that takes many twists and turns, each participant spiraling in and out until understanding is reached. In this part of the conversation, I found myself excited, amazed, and confused by this common thread woven through the participants' stories.

What is interesting is that now that I recognize this lens and it is toward the end of Cycle 3, I see this reality—being embodied as a choiceful act—showing up in far more areas than simply here in this study. For instance, as a hospice counselor who works with people going through the dying process, I witness this phenomenon over and over—people choosing to stay alive, even after they have stopped eating for days or sometimes even several weeks, until they are finally ready to go. My suspicion is that now that this theme or lens has come into being, I will notice it far more often. This reminds me of how when we become aware of a new word for the very first time, all of a sudden it appears to be everywhere. Perhaps this speaks to the strength of our subjectivity.

This choice to be embodied, or to turn away from death, is described in a variety of ways by participants, with common themes and even sometimes using the same language. The context through which these experiences of choice occurred came in a variety of forms including energetic spiritual openings, a psychedelic experience, a childhood dream, and a major illness. The literature in the field that most obviously points to this experience described by a number of women in this study is that of the Near Death Experience (NDE). Some of the more common features found in the after life and

NDE literature (e.g., Moody, 1975; Ring, 1984), which are also apparent in these women's stories, describe a movement at death away from one's body, and then a choice point when the person must decide whether to keep going or return back to re-enter one's body. Out-of-body experiences, however, are not necessarily always associated with NDE's, such as the many accounts documented by scholars such as Robert Monroe (1973, 1987), who study out-of-body phenomena extensively. It seems that part of what happened for women during these out-of-body experiences, which in many ways could be understood as spiritual openings, was that their consciousness was blown open, expanded out beyond the boundaries of the body. A common theme described as part of this experience is that of getting farther and farther away from one's body.

Arline described a spiritual experience brought on by taking peyote in the wilderness. Through this experience she moved out beyond her body so much so that she was barely attached to her physical form. Some participants described "threads" or "wires" by which they were dangling in these moments. Arline said, "I could feel an extremely fine gossamer thread that was attached to this body." Janet Adler described this experience similarly when she said:

I would see electric "wires" going out from my body, into which the energy was funneling. Following the energy out, I knew that there was a critical distance beyond which I could not get back. When the energy was too strong, I wasn't always sure where my boundary was or whether I could hold it, track it well enough, so that I could always get back. I can remember very specifically certain moments when I felt like I knew I would die, if I did not stay in my body "enough."

I found that when I read these descriptions of being out beyond one's body, I was surprised by the strength of my sympathetic resonance. While I would not have previously described moments in my life where I was way out beyond the boundaries of

my physical form as being on the brink of actual, physical death, I felt a deep recognition in hearing these stories.

Two women spoke of this tenuous experience of being way out beyond one's body as "teetering on the edge." Janet Adler said that the two dangers associated with going too far out from her body were psychosis and "death, which I knew would happen if I couldn't stay here enough." She continued, "I can remember those moments when I felt like I was just teetering on the edge of actual, physical death." Rose used the same words to describe what she experienced as she danced on the edge of life. She said, "Thirty years ago I had a near death experience and I opened into this incredible space of light. It knocked the pins out of my whole belief system. There was an appreciation of life, and of my body, that came from that experience. I was really teetering on the edge; I had a pulmonary infarct." Precipitated by an intense kundalini opening, Cara described how she felt her soul preparing to leave her body: "Eventually, I felt like I was dying, that I was getting so weak from the force of the energy, and I felt myself preparing to die. I could feel the soul was lifting out of the form, and I realized I really had to find a way to begin to bring a world of form back into apprehension." Janet Adler used the words "critical distance" to speak to that point where there was recognition of the need to bring oneself back into form. A typical near death experience documented in Raymond Moody's (1975) classic book, *Life After Life*, reports a person describing the experience of being on the brink of death, much in the same way women in this study have described. Moody reports this person saying:

I became very seriously ill, and the doctor put me in the hospital. This one morning a solid gray mist gathered around me, and I left my body. I had a floating sensation as I felt myself get out of my body, and I looked back and I could see myself on the bed and there was no fear. It was quiet—very peaceful and serene. I was not in the least bit upset or frightened. It was just a tranquil feeling, and it

was something which I didn't dread. I felt that maybe I was dying, and I felt that if I did not get back to my body, I would be dead, gone. (p. 38)

Virtually every person told of a choice point, the moment when they had to make a choice to live or give into death.

Arline described her choice point when she said, "There was a moment in which I had the realization that I could just keep on going, and that I could let go of that thread and cause myself to die." She also said that the experience of being so far out of her body was an extremely pleasurable one. Arline described her ultimate decision to remain embodied when she said, "I then understood the meaning of the will to live. And I stopped myself from going higher, farther, more into the light, because I realized it wasn't time for me to let go. I started reeling myself back in and becoming less gossamer, less ethereal, less sheer, more dense, closer to my body, closer, closer, closer." These experiences have many of the same features as found in near death experiences. A choice to move away from the light, back into form is often described by those who have gone through a near death experience. For instance, Moody (1975) reports a person describing their choice point:

I was out of my body, and I realized that I had to make a decision. I knew that I could not stay out of my physical body for a very long period of time so—well, for others this is very hard to understand, but for me then it was perfectly clear—I knew I had to move on out or to get back in. (p. 79)

Cara talked about the choice point in her journey when she moved from "boundless vibration" back into solid matter, and how she managed to navigate that process. She described this stage of her journey:

My consciousness was absorbed and concentrated in a world of vibration, boundless vibration. The forms were only loosely there in the foreground. What I did was, I went out and I started naming things, and I named myself. I said, "I'm Cara, and this is a tree." I remember eating dirt: "This is dirt." I put it into my mouth. I tried to bring my awareness back into my more concrete and distinct senses, into something that was formed, solid, stable, and non-vibratory. And that

actually had a different effect. It began to slow the energy down enough to where I didn't feel like I was dying, and so my body vibration began to slow and the body began to relax more.

It seems that this movement toward density is a common dimension of bringing awareness back into material form. Rose was in the hospital for about a month before her body "made the choice" to stay alive. She said, "Eventually it was my body that made the choice to live. There was something about coming into my body so that it felt like I was in a new body, that somehow this was a second lifetime in this body—just appreciating being alive, being here, and the absolute thread that we all hang from." Arline reflected on just how much "control on the most subtle level" she had over keeping her consciousness embodied.

Janet Adler described how her intense commitment to her children and her extraordinary will served to keep her alive. Janet said,

In those years of initiatory experience the first and most compelling reason to remain in my body was being the mother of two small boys. I was separated. I knew that I will not leave these children. This is like a command, an inner command. No matter how incredible these experiences are, no matter what they teach me, I will never leave these children, unless I die from this. But I'm not going to allow that to happen. So it was a tremendous experience of will, and I think I came in with that.

As in the case for Janet Adler, Moody (1975) documents a number of people who report coming back to their bodies in order to complete the task of raising their children.

Janet Adler spoke of the "tremendous experience of will" that she called upon to remain in the body and Cara, too, spoke of the ways in which will was utilized to stay in the body. She said, "I kind of willed ordinary consciousness back, so that I could live and assist my body through the experience." While not necessarily reflecting on the decision to live or die, Patricia speaks to her choice point when she chose to be embodied. Like in

Janet Adler's case, it was her children that gave her a sense of purpose which allowed her to "choose to be here." Patricia reflected,

I realized that part of my purpose was to have these children, and who they were to me, how we taught each other whatever we needed. It allowed me to also give them separate identities, that they're also here for their own purpose, and not just to be appendages to other people. So reclaiming that through a sense of purpose, was really what allowed me to own my body. Like, "Okay, I choose to be here." I chose to be born.

For Yeshe, it was not in her role as mother (which she is) but as child, when she was faced with the decision to choose or not to choose to be embodied. Through a dream, when she was a young child, Yeshe faced her reluctance to be embodied:

I had a dream when I was 3 years old that my spiritual teachers came to me, and it kind of triggered my mind to remember why I came here. My mom said I wouldn't eat before that, and she was worried I was going to starve to death. I would hardly eat anything. I remember waking after this dream and thinking, "Okay, I accept being here, I remember why I'm here." It wasn't so conceptual, but I said, "Okay, I'm going to eat here. I'm going to eat food." And I remember going to the kitchen and eating something. So there's something about the whole eating thing, and being willing to be embodied.

Yeshe talked about taking in food as the symbolic and literal moment of choosing life.

I once went to an intuitive counselor who said to me, in response to my question regarding having children at some later date in my life, "Having children would really keep you in this world. It would be the one thing, a bridge, that could really get you to stay in this realm." That comment was said to me about the time when I was starting this research, a time when I was most certainly more ambivalent, perhaps even reluctant, about this whole embodiment project. Reflecting back to my Cycle 2 lenses, I am once again struck by just how much my thinking about these matters has changed over the course of the 3 years that I have been cycling and interpreting and changing in the process. I am coming to understand the ways in which I, too, am choosing to be here, embodied.

Change Lenses: Challenge & Change Result in New Interpretations

Sexuality is Integral to Embodiment

Sexuality and spirituality—do they belong in the same body, in the same sentence? Sexuality for most women in this study, and certainly in the literature reviewed prior to Cycle 3, is very often associated with spirituality. For some women in the study, though they spoke about sexuality in our dialogue, preferred to have that section of the interview not reprinted in the final portrait.

Examining the evolution of my Cycle 2 lens—(16) *Sexuality is body bound*—in relation to this present Cycle 3 lens, a few things are apparent. This Cycle 2 seed lens actually represents a whole cluster of thoughts and assumptions which were synthesized into this lens during Cycles 1 and 2 of interpretation. Along the lines of much of what I have said so far in this study, I came into the study with beliefs and assumptions about the body, and most definitely sexuality, being *less than* and more primitive than spirit. While I still recognize the primitive aspect of our sexuality, I am no longer inclined to reduce it to that, to polarize sexuality against spirit. Of course, this negation of the body and sexuality is a common belief that has a long history especially within, though not limited to, Euro-American Christian culture. This became evident in the literature reviewed in an earlier chapter of this dissertation. To put a voice to this long tradition of body-negation among religious traditions, let us turn to a passage from the Indian *Upanishads* (1.3), a work which was produced probably in the third century B.C.E.:

O Venerable one, what good is the enjoyment of desires in this ill-smelling, insubstantial body, a mere conglomerate of bones, skin, sinew, muscles, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, feces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm? What good is the enjoyment of desires in this body, which is afflicted with desire, anger, greed, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, disease, sorrow, death, and the like? (as cited in Feuerstein, 1998, pp. 52-53)

As we have seen in the literature, gradually theologians and spiritual practitioners from a variety of traditions are challenging these body-negating models and updating them with body-positive theologies that honor human forces such as sexuality.

Through working with these findings that ultimately became this Cycle 3 lens, certain principals about the nature of sexuality and spirituality became revealed. One way of understanding this integral connection between spirituality and sexuality is to view sexual energy as that which has the capacity to be transformed and purified, an energy that may open into a variety of qualities which might include greater love and light. It is also through sexual union with another that the occasion to taste true union with the Divine is made possible. What I am calling “true union” is the transcendence of our limited, egoic self into something greater, which is often made possible through merging with another in the union of the sexual encounter. It is through a sexual union with our lover that we may taste union with that which is our own true self—God, the Divine, Christ Consciousness. Exactly what the relationship is between spirituality and sexuality seems to vary from person to person. One thing that does seem clear is that these two forces, sexuality and spirituality, are intimately intertwined.

For some, sexuality provides an opportunity for transcending the personal self. The orgasm is often said to be the closest a person will get—without necessarily doing intense spiritual practices—to tasting ego-death, and in that the immediacy of the moment, of our truest self, can be felt and known. Rose reflected on this when she said, “You know, the French refer to orgasm as *la petite morte*. It is the little death. It’s any place where we release our sense of separate boundaries and our images of ourselves. It leaves us with an opening, and a kind of death.” The literature has often associated orgasm with a taste of spiritual liberation.

Rose also spoke about spiritual experiences in general that have opened up through sexual union. Very often light seems to be associated with spiritual openings—whether they be energetic openings in the body, near death experiences, or sexual union. Rose commented on “realms of light” that were experienced as she and her partner opened together in sexual union:

And there is a place of union. It sort of got to the place of understanding when marriage God made a sacrament. There's a saying by Inayat Khan that in the union of two loving hearts is the unity of God. If we begin to open—it's what tantra's been teaching for the millennia, but we don't generally understand in this culture and in most spiritual paths—we are able to have an experience of union, and of letting go of our separate isolated consciousness by merging with another human being. In this culture, that's really the only place where people in general are aware of letting go of ego boundaries.

Yeshe, too, reflected on profound sexual spiritual experiences at the young of 18, where a love for, and opening toward, all beings was present. On reflecting on the love that is possible through the sexual encounter, Rose said, “It really is a place where all of the religions have made sexuality something sacred, something of the sacrament if we want to use the Christian terminology. And it is a sacrament, because that union is a reflection of a kind of divine union. It's an opening in love, and a joining in love.” While Rose and Yeshe emphasize the love and light that is available through sexual union, Valerie Vener explained how for her, sexuality is a vehicle for moving energy. Articulating how she came to move energy more freely, Valerie Vener said, “I knew that I had been male many lifetimes before. I could hold onto a lingam on a man's body and absolutely know that it was like a driving stick for running the energy in his body. And I could allow myself to just simply, again, relax in the stillness, and move energy through my body, through his body, through the lingam.” Valerie explained how she both learned and taught others to explore the transformation potential that is inherent but often lost in the sexual union:

What did I have to do to find God through sexuality? It had a lot to do with retraining myself, and retraining everyone that I was sexual with to use the human instrument the way it was built. Most of us are engaged in sexuality in a way that actually dampens and hides, and really inevitably destroys the energy during sexuality, throws it off the frontal plane, takes the stress that's involved with that contraction we're talking about and just blows it off, therefore making less of a channel for your own energy to move into the body.

It seems that transformation through sexual union with another, and through working alchemically with sexual energies holds one of the greatest avenues through which whole-body awakening can occur.

Theresa, a celibate nun, reflected on knowing God through loving a man. A nun since she was 18, at the age of 35 Theresa participated in a program that took her to New York for a year. She described the experience as “freeing” and “very spiritual.” During that year she fell deeply in love with a priest. Theresa spoke about the experience when she said, “And it became physical. The physicality of it, the very first time I was just held, I remember going to my own apartment that night, and I had a very clear sense that this was about liberation in God. Not just me, but God.” Theresa reflected on the rightness of the intimacy she explored: “My persistence in staying in the relationship came out of that experience of, *This is about liberation. And it's about God. And me.*”

Considerations regarding the vow of celibacy were experienced by both women in the study who are nuns, though for each person that process looked quite different. For Theresa, the struggle involved being intimate with a priest with whom she fell madly in love—a love relationship that changed her life. For Catherine, the struggle regarding her vow of celibacy arose in response to her deep love for two babies living in her community. Reflecting on that time, Catherine said, “I just loved those two babies. I was in a position where I needed to help and take care of them, I needed to be part of that family. I went through a bit of a struggle. Do I love these kids too much? Is this somehow

not for me? Is it against my vow of chastity, or what is going on here?" Ultimately Catherine reconciled this struggle by embracing the fact that it was through her humanness and her warmth that she came to love these two children as a gift of God in her life. Catherine illustrates how being a sexual being is not necessarily about sex. She said, "It just means experiencing yourself as a woman, as a total woman with whatever that means. It probably most shows in interactions with people. I think I come across as somebody that is warm and open, hospitable, a welcoming person." This realization again points to the relationship between sexuality and openness. In his book *Sacred Sexuality*, Feuerstein (1992) draws on the work of Dody Donnelly to illustrate the possibility of an erotic mysticism. Donnelly writes:

God not only loves us in and through our sexuality but, of course, delights in our own human lovemaking. That love of beauty, union, and creativity is the sexual drive itself and God's gift. Sexuality is an aspect of our deeply human yearning for fulfillment and meaning, for God. In its total pervasion of our lives, *eros* is the source of life and fuels all our loves—including our love for God!

Through our unique personalities we're called to shine back to God the joyful experience of loving and being loved sexually and spiritually. That response may be simply our daily amazement, wondering, yearning, expectation, and stunned delight at nature's wondrous bounty of dazzling color, scent, and sound—God's daily wooing of our hearts. We know the Beloved is near, indeed, resident within us always. We see his blood upon the rose, in the diamond eye and flashing wing of bluebird, while the white night awes our timid, quivering souls. (as cited in Feuerstein, 1992, p. 183)

Sexuality also seems to be connected intimately with life force, whether it be procreation or as a healing energy. Maya speaks to the power and healing that is inherently associated with sexuality through the goddess of love and sexuality, Oshun. Maya explains how Oshun heals sexuality and when she is absent, how "all the rivers dried up, all the flowers died, and the people couldn't stand their existence because there was no joy." Anna describes how moments in sexuality can also open us to the dialectic

between embodiment and transcendence, ascending and descending. She describes just how this happens:

After opening up into higher states, allowing my mind and body to experience bliss through methods of meditation and spiritual technique, the soul descends back into the body's reference points, down-stepping through the levels of awareness and consciousness and translating that through the mechanism of the nervous system. This dripping of amrita, a physical correlate to higher states distilled into essence, stimulates the centers of the brain which connect to the transcendent. The integration of these states and experiences, accessed through techniques in the realm of spirituality or through exalted moments in sexuality, is still based in the domain of the heart.

If we consider that enlightenment or awakening is a process which includes both transcendence and embodiment, sexuality appears to be one vehicle for accessing both our primitive, animal nature, and God—simultaneously. Sexuality affords us the possibility of touching the Divine, while at the same time, grounding it in our bodies, and in relationship. In her book, *Woman Awake*, Ryan (1998) echoes this sentiment:

If our prayer is to evolve, deepen and expand, I am convinced that it must extend beyond the domains of mind and heart and allow the whole body to dance. And if our prayer is to enter our bodies, redeeming the organs, the limbs, the skin, the glands, and reclaiming the body as the sacred vessel it is, then we have no more accurate gauge of our success in this domain than to see its effects upon our appreciation of ourselves as passionate, juicy, sensuous, full-bodied sexual beings. If we are truly becoming women of spirit, we will be loosening our rigidity, both of muscle and of attitude. (p. 334)

As Ryan suggests, and according to the findings in this present study, it seems clear that there exists an intimate relationship between these two forces—spirituality and sexuality—and that sexuality is an integral aspect of embodiment.

Bringing Spirit into Matter is Purposeful

So why are we incarnated anyway? Is there a purpose to this grand experiment? Or is the purpose to simply hurry up and transcend this messy, human body realm and move onto lighter, clearer realms? This captures my inner dialogue over the past three years, through Cycles 1, 2, and 3 of interpretation. Of course, this dialogue has been

changing as my understanding has been evolving over the course of this research. This research points to an understanding that there *is* a purpose to embodiment, to bringing spirit into matter. This research suggests that the purpose of embodiment might include both an acceleration of awakening that is thought to occur when one is embodied, as well as being a vehicle for experience that ultimately may be of benefit to others.

Several women suggested that part of their spiritual evolution included an understanding that bringing spirit into matter was purposeful. Catherine pointed to the life of Jesus and said, “Why did Jesus take on flesh and become man? This is kind of crazy if this is something that’s not good.” Claire, too, referred to resurrection and the life of Jesus as a way of giving meaning and purpose to our embodiment. Reflecting on resurrection as “life and body being reunited,” Claire said, “It’s not that the spirit floated away disembodied, but actually came back and could be seen and touched.” Reflecting on the Catholic Church, Claire talked about how the divine came through “tangible things” such as “bread, and wine, and water.” She explained how this concrete aspect of spirituality is woven through all things, including our bodies when she said, “the blessings that are on our bodies, that part feels incarnational to me. It’s not just talking to the head. It’s including the senses.” Claire emphasized the life of Jesus as a way of understanding the meaning of matter:

And Jesus said, “Put your fingers in my hands, in my wounds,” after he had risen and appeared. He said, “Put your hand in my side.” Again, if you look at it from a symbolic perspective, in terms of what that says about matter, it’s that the Christ didn’t disappear up into the heavens. He came back and broke bread and fed his disciples fish on the beach—concrete.”

Rose too, articulated a clear sense of knowing that bringing spirit into matter was purposeful. In that, she described the body as “the final product of enlightenment.” Rose said,

So that the body becomes spacious, the body becomes clear, and that it becomes filled with light. I think there used to be a part of me that wanted freedom from embodiment. And at this point I see that one can be free and embodied. That if we were not going to be embodied, there would be no point to incarnating. There must be something that we bring into matter, into life.

Arline claimed that the body was for her a “vehicle of experience,” and that without it, one might be free as a kite to float about disembodied. She said, “perhaps you can be more effective if you’re embodied.” This suggests that there might be a beneficial purpose in bringing spirit into matter. Patricia, too, spoke of the body as “a vehicle” and explained how she also believes one of her purposes is to benefit others, as well as to accelerate spiritual growth. Patricia said, “The realm of having a body is one particular realm. We come into this realm of having the body in order to have certain kinds of experiences that actually accelerate the evolutionary process.” Patricia said,

Because if we didn’t have three-dimensional reality and three-dimensional bodies, then everything would be mind reality. And mind reality is fine, except that I think it’s harder to get what it really is. But when you have a body, which is part of samsara, then you actually experience the pain that is caused by these kinds of thought realities. And when you experience that, that would propel us to look for what is the origin and source of this, and how to stop this from happening. I think to some extent that’s one of the purposes of embodiment, to get it faster.

Patricia said, “My spiritual practice feels like my coming to myself in my own embodiment, really grounding in my own purpose, which ultimately has the motivation of having some benefit to everyone around me.” Maya, too, spoke of serving others through the practice of trance possession. She said, “that force speaks through my consciousness using my body to show, to demonstrate. We believe that we literally, physically embody the spirit in our flesh, for a period of time, so that spirits can speak through our consciousness and our body.” Cara reflected on how often we bypass the body when she said that we use it “as a nice sturdy meditation cushion, to get the rocket off.” She and others are proposing that “our evolutionary thrust” includes exploring the

entire human being, leaving nothing out. Cara said, “It seems to me that unless we explore, unless the body and the organs are enlightened, we will not be complete human beings.” I believe that this is one of our next greatest spiritual tasks as a collective, to inquire deeply into the human body.

The question of whether there is a purpose to all this embodiment is an important one I think, not because we need to actually answer the question, but because if we do find a purpose, we are more likely to relax into and embrace our embodiment rather than resist it. This relaxing in our embodiment can provide the energetic thrust to keep growing and ultimately opening. The fact that this lens falls into the “new lenses” group points to the fact that I had not previously held the understanding that bringing spirit into the body is purposeful. This energy that is available to us when we accept our embodiment as purposeful brings with it the capacity for joy in the incarnation, and a celebration of this precious life.

Seed Lenses: Deepened, Refined, Nuanced Insights & Interpretations

Spiritual Maturation Includes an Energetic Awakening of the Body

It is a very common theme among women in this study to describe having energetic awakenings in the body. Over half of the participants described some version of an energetic opening that proved to often be very intense on a body level. This is an experience that I, too, am intimately familiar with. One could speculate *why* this seems to be such a common factor among these women’s life experiences. Yet I am also reminded of a phone conversation that I had with one participant during the editing phase who expressed concern regarding a misunderstanding about the nature of these powerful experiences. She said that the important part was not the experience itself, but rather what

the experience shows or teaches us. What *does* this type of cellular, energetic opening reveal to us?

From my understanding of the various texts in relationship with my own life experiences, I believe that these energetic openings serve to bring more light into the density of our human, egoic form. It serves to bust open our blockages and burn through that which is false in us. As the energy moves through us, we have the opportunity to contain, channel, and hold greater and greater degrees of energy, of light and space, within our form. By doing this we have the opportunity to once again bridge the world of emptiness and form in our bodies.

Maya describes the way in which the “force” enters her when she dances, and how in her African tradition, energy is worked with:

When we dance for the Lord of Thunder, we are reaching up and pulling lightning out of the sky, passing that energy through our bodies, raising adrenaline. Each one of the dances pulls on the energy of that natural force, and reenacts adventures from the mythology of those deities. Ultimately, the purpose of the dance is to send out a prayer that is heard and felt by that natural force, so that that force is awakened in your body. That force enters into you.

Embedded deeply within Christianity and stepping briefly into the charismatic church, Claire reflects on an energetic experience that has similar characteristics to the initiatory phenomena across other traditions:

It was one of the most amazing spiritual experiences of my life, one of those kind of fireworks type moments. Suddenly, the entire place disappeared. The minister disappeared and I didn't hear anything else. It was an experience of light, love, of absolute unity. I was just caught up into something that I had never experienced before, and it was phenomenal. I never wanted to open my eyes. At that moment, I wasn't really conscious of my embodied self. It was just union with everything. Of course, we don't stay at that place, we do come back into our bodies. When I came back, or became conscious again, of body, I was speaking in tongues, and I didn't care.

What is more common, at least among these participants, is the languaging of such an experience through the lens of kundalini energy. Valerie Vener said, “This body

experiences energy quite profoundly. So it would have huge kundalini experiences. After the fire I would sit in meditation and simply breathe and visualize the master I had met as my own heart.” Janet Adler said that she “knew immediately that the initiation was of value, and I knew that I knew something about it, and the only thing that I can connect that to is the infant trauma.” She described the energy as a “gift” and said that, “Our job is to learn how to come into relationship to it, not to merge with it, and not to deny it.”

Arline spoke about energy opening in the body, breaking through blockages and holding patterns:

Somehow through my yoga—I started with kundalini yoga—I learned and intuitively began fooling around with breath of fire, and intentional breathing. I learned on my own to breathe through the pain of the rolting, so that I could come out the other side into the most exquisite spacious ecstasy, with lights flashing and even chords and choruses of sounds. Just incredible spiritual experiences.

The experience of kundalini as an energetic force which opens the physical body on a variety of levels is one which many of the women in this study experienced, with varying degrees of intensity and duration.

As in the case with Janet Adler, central to both Cara and Anna’s spiritual unfolding was the kundalini energy moving its way through a woman’s body. Cara described the intensity of the experience:

At the time of the actual energy opening I felt there were literally millions of atomic bombs exploding in my cells. It certainly felt like seeing the first Fire, the Biblical face of God, and I was not certain that I would survive the blast of it. I felt I had wandered into a secret chamber of existence, into the core of the atomic nature, with no preparation, and not really knowing what I had landed in, but with a very pure heart. That part lasted for many months. My experience was one of existing in a body which was vibrating at such a fast speed, that I couldn’t actually register.

Anna too, spoke about the incredible gift of the kundalini energy and the intelligence which is inherent to the force:

When I talk about the embodiment of my spirit, I feel like now I know I passed through the gateway of the Mother, by the experience of it. That came through the process of the kundalini awakening. What I believe is that kundalini awakening is about giving everyone the chance to wake up, while in the body, to their spiritual embodiment. It is a gift of Divine energy planted deep within every one of us, awaiting its time by cause or invitation, to arise. There is a lot of prewritten information within the experience which can give us a jump-start to the higher realms. Then the obligation or calling is to integrate it, and to personalize it, and in that way I feel we gift it back.

It seems that part of what initiates the kundalini energy to uncoil is an ascending movement of energy, one that both Cara and Anna reflected upon, a realization of the nondual nature of reality. It is as if consciousness tremendously expands in order to experience the true nature of reality, or the emptiness of it, and then that realization descends, integrating back into the organism, the particular person, each and every cell. This too, appeared to be how the kundalini energy moved through my own consciousness and body. In reflecting on earlier lenses from Cycle 2, *(14) Physical sensations of energy bring up a fear response (kundalini rising); and (15) Energy that animates the body is benign and even has healing capacities*, I am reminded of how the initiatory energy scared me at times, yet it is also in part what brought me to this study. My understanding around types of energetic openings has most definitely broadened, expanded, and deepened through this Cycle 3 of interpretation.

Boundaries—Between You and Me, World and Self—Are Experienced as Permeable

An earlier lens that points to this eventual understanding can be seen in the Cycle 2 lens, *(8) There is a felt sense that at times awareness expands beyond the boundaries of my body, though it includes my body*. I think much of my early thinking regarding this lens, and the evolution of it, is captured in my personal story (Appendix A). What is notable about my own understanding at that time is that while I did intuit this seed lens,

with the realization of permeable boundaries also came a great deal of fear. Through the evolution of this research that fear has largely come to rest.

Because boundaries were experienced naturally as so permeable, Janet Adler described the importance of learning to strengthen her boundaries. She said, "In the initiation, by necessity, I learned to strengthen my boundaries when the force of the energy was so great that I feared I couldn't stay here, and felt my own life on the line." Maya too, spoke of a moment when her fluid boundaries nearly endangered her life. In describing one of her *eco-erotic episodes*, Maya speaks to the importance of developing a witness:

And it's very dangerous, because I couldn't separate me from the green. I wanted to be part of that green. I could have leapt to my death if somebody who knew me was not there. So I really have to ground sometimes and say, "What is this feeling? What is this? How do I really handle this? No, don't leap. You want to be one with the green, but leaping into the canopy of the forest is not the answer. Smear some lichen on yourself. That'll work. Go put on a green dress, paint your face, run out, go hug a tree, make love to somebody."

Maya also talked about what it is like to have such fluid boundaries in relationship to other people. She said, "One of the problems of being a child of Oshun, is you can't really tell where you end and the other person begins. Right now I'm all up in your aura, and you're all up in mine." Yeshe echoed this in saying, "I don't actually experience a physical separation between what is my body, and what isn't my body. It doesn't mean I can't differentiate between say, your energy field or my energy field, or something like that. But I don't actually experience the separation." This theme that Yeshe describes of realizing oneself as not separate from another, while at the same time having the ability to discern between one's own energy field from that of another, is a common theme for many women in relation to their self identity.

Patricia reflected on ways in which fluid boundaries can present problems for the person who has not yet strengthened a solid sense of self when she said, “Because to think that you had a body for all sentient beings, when you don’t even have boundaries, and you’re absorbing everybody’s energy, it could be a big distortion.” Both the ability to dissolve boundaries and hold boundaries seem to be important skills for a mature spiritual development. As a spiritual teacher, Yeshe also reflected on the nature of fluid boundaries and the difficulties that might arise with this experience:

There might be a large group of people, and I will start feeling everybody’s pain. The first time I ever had a really bad headache happened in that situation. That’s a sensitivity on the level of the body, which brings up a whole question about boundaries. The whole thing about boundaries, I think, changes a lot when you *are* really integrating the non-separation, and the realization of emptiness, and interdependence.

Janet Adler reminds us of how to hold the paradox of being the same and separate in the same moment. She said, “The flower is separate from me because of its shape, and color, and form, and substance. But it is also imbued with the same life force that I am. We share an energy perhaps, but we’re different forms. Witnessing it, I am in a unitive state with it.” This feature of developing a witness is a common thread for many of these women who naturally experience themselves as permeable.

Challenging the very notion of boundaries, Rose said, “You realize your boundaries are really structures in your mind.” On reflecting on the sexual encounter between two individuals, Rose said, “The fact that we can open and enter into another human being’s experience, or energetic field, is really quite extraordinary. And the more we let go, or the more we have flexible boundaries, the more we are able to do that. As you move along in meditation, you open, you merge with something larger.” Rose is proposing that the more we let go and allow our boundaries to become soft, the possibility for truly opening to another human being also opens.

It seems that the main point that is articulated through this lens is the importance of being able to have boundaries, while in the next moment, allowing them to dissolve. The essential understanding that boundaries are permeable—maybe more for me than for a lot of people—is now able to exist in a neutral clarity that is no longer surrounded by a haze of fear. It is simply what it is. I believe that this neutrality came about through the witness being further developed throughout this research process. This relaxation regarding permeable boundaries also came through a sense of trust that was developed primarily through engaging the text, being in dialogue with these women who proposed a deep and broad understanding of the notion of permeable boundaries.

Self Reference, or Awareness of 'I' is Fluid and Flexible and is Not Fixed in the Body

This lens in many ways is an extension of the previous lens, an aspect of a point that is related to and yet slightly different from the previous lens. This time the focal point is on the sense of 'I' in relation to the body. The seed lens in Cycle 2 that directly relates to this understanding is (9) *Sometimes it feels like spirit, or awareness, is located outside or behind (my head, to be exact) my body*. Similar to the previous lens just discussed, this seed lens was felt by me during Cycles 1 and 2 of this research, and written about in my personal story. As was the case in the previous lens, I also experienced the reality of what this lens describes as being clouded by a great deal of fear that arose with this realization.

Once again, the ability to hold paradox appears to be a capacity that many of these women described in relation to their sense of location or 'I.' This was evident when Yeshe said, "I do experience my sense of 'I' in reference to being located in a body. Although I know that's not true, and I experience that it's not true also. But in the habitual relative sense, I experience it like that." Similarly, Janet Adler said, "When you

ask, ‘Is there a location?’ [to the ‘I’ or self,] I see and experience just the space, the emptiness. It is shaped by my form, but my skin feels permeable. I feel the same with the energy around me. But I also feel that I am in this body, which separates me from the energy around me, except that I don’t feel that separation, again, as a merging.” Both Yeshe and Janet Adler spoke to the capacity to hold two seemingly opposing truths at the same time—location and no location.

Valerie Vener described the reality of non-separation apparent to her as the two of us sat together. Rather than focusing on the tension between relative and absolute (the apparent ‘you’ and ‘I’) Valerie Vener articulated an understanding that does not differentiate between self and other. She said, “We are absolutely the same one. You may reference ‘I’ as Vipassana. I may reference ‘I’ as Valerie, but I am in absolute knowing clarity in my cellular structure that I am Vipassana, that I am Valerie.”

Some women talked about the sense of ‘I’ in relation to the body. Patricia said, “I would say that in the past whenever I thought of ‘I,’ I would relate it to certain kinds of feelings or sensations that I had, located in particular places in my body. Because in a sense I think that was where I was stuck.” Rather than describing this as a limitation, Theresa spoke about her sense of ‘I’ in relation to the body: “Sometimes I just pray, putting my hands over my uterus, and just pray that the life energy be with me. In many ways, I feel like I situate who I am in my body.” Theresa also spoke to the reality of being situated in a body, being embodied, and how this gives other people a reference point through which to know you. She said,

When people will say to me, “I love you Theresa.” You know, it’s so funny, I think, it’s not a vague *you* that they love. They love *Theresa*. And who is that? And I say, “Well how do they experience me?” I’m embodied, so that’s part of it. But I know there’s a spirit in me that’s life-giving and attractive to others. You know? That’s me. And it’s very awesome for me.

Anna described the commingling of her subtle body and physical body as her “sense of place” or location, and talked about how this is intimately related to her kundalini awakening. She said, “I will say that through the kundalini awakening—a prominent path for me—I could sometimes sense my spirit as if hovering above my head. It’s absolutely fascinating. Literally an out-of-body experience.” Anna then went on to explain the importance of bringing in this “higher light” and integrating this presence or light, becoming it.

Several participants described feeling the sense of ‘I’ as residing in the heart.

Patricia said, “What I would like to refer to as the ‘I’ is basically the heart, that when you say ‘I,’ you’re in your heart.” Valerie Vener too, ultimately senses the self in the heart. She said,

Essentially we come back to this very yearning, burning place in the right side of the heart. My heart has different locations. Like the physical heart is on the left, and that pumps the physical system. And the psychic heart is in the middle, and that pumps the emotional and psychic system. And then the spiritual heart is on the right, and that pumps the spiritual system.

Rose, too, emphasized the heart and speculated that in the end her sense of ‘I’ or “locus of consciousness” is in her body. She went on to say, however, “But it’s not who I am. Just as my emotional state is not who I am, just as my thoughts or beliefs in any given time is not who I am. But there is a locus of consciousness on all of those levels. And it’s probably heart-centered. I think that just has to do with the fact that I walk a path of the heart.” Anna, too, said that she believes the heart to be an essential resting place for humans. Anna explained:

I like to believe that the ultimate destination for us as humans is to reside predominantly in the heart. That is where I want to mostly be. The head and the base converge in the heart, taking the wisdom from the higher planes with the experience and exploration of the lower realms and mixing them into the greatest and deepest understanding of compassion that we can have.

While Claire did not specifically speak about her sense of ‘I’ as having a location in her body, she did reflect on how her sense of self is mixed with Christ energy. She suggested that her true self is actually Christ energy. This realization occurred after a powerful visualization prayer. Claire recalled:

What happened was, Claire is where the risen Christ energy is. It’s no longer isolated in one teacher. It is released, and it is in Mary, Claire. What happened, again physically, was like this explosion of light, of unity. And from that moment on, I have not been separate. It’s like when St. Paul says, “No longer I, but Christ lives in me.” How does it actually function for me? Sometimes as I’m talking, it’s kind of an external part, but the Christ energy, the Christ consciousness is no longer separate from who I am.

With my own realization that the ‘I’ was not fixed in my body, I oscillated between freedom and fear—the liberation of that realization, and a fear which arose as a reaction to this loss of personal location. I think the fear brought with it elements of dissociation. Now, at the end of Cycle 3, through the various dialogues with my participants, and engaging the texts that arose from those talks, this understanding finally lives in me with more ease, curiosity, and relaxation.

The Contemplation of Death Brings into Focus the Immediacy of Life

After Cycles 1 and 2 of this study, I articulated a few seed understandings about this notion of death. They are captured in the following lenses from Cycle 2: (7) *Part of being human includes fear of death of this physical form, the body*; (11) *It is useful (as a spiritual practice) to contemplate death, the eventual end of our physical form*; and (13) *Evolution of consciousness includes facing our mortality*. In my initial lenses there was a recognition of the importance of contemplating death, though with this was also an assumption that inevitably fear and death go together.

My life circumstances in the last year—and the choices I have made toward those circumstances—have afforded me a greater intimacy with this contemplation of death.

Two life changes or choices that are particularly relevant here both took place about one year ago (two years into the study). One, I started practicing Tibetan Buddhism, and with that began to do formal practices that work directly with preparing for death. One of the central practices that addresses death is Chöd, which I now practice on occasion. The Chöd text was the first of the texts I came into contact with during Cycle 1 of this research. The second major life change that is relevant to this lens is that I started to work with the dying through Hospice, as a counselor. I have had the privilege of counseling people who are dying and their families, for the past year.

I would not say that I am now without the fear of death, but what I can say is that my response to death is evolving daily, as I contemplate the impermanence of this physical form that will one day stop breathing. I am taught daily about this process of death through working with my Hospice patients.

While clearly my dialogues with participants around the topic of death were guided by my explicit questions, still, death seemed to be a common thread of contemplation for several women. Many of my participants reflected on how considerations of death are intertwined with one's spiritual life. Janet Adler explained,

During the initiation, when the energy came, also came death. They were synonymous. I was acutely aware always of the fragility of our lives, of my life, of the children's lives, my husband's life, my mother's life, acutely aware. And now that this alignment has come about, and I don't have the energy coming as a separate phenomenon so much the way it used to, death now is the same as life. The energy brought death to me, and now it is part of me all the time. I am aware of death all the time.

Rose also said that she is acutely aware of death on a daily basis. She describes a certain immediacy with life that can come with the remembrance of death. Rose said, "I live my life one day at a time. I'm very conscious of death in a very real way. My hope is that I die consciously, and I live with the fact that I could go any day. I think the consciousness

of death has us live differently.” Perhaps because death brings this immediacy and a sober sense of reality with it, some people are naturally attracted to it. This was the case for Yeshe, for even as a young girl she was drawn to death. She recalled, “I’ve *always* just loved funerals and memorials. As a child, I didn’t know what it was, it was just a feeling. But as I’ve been older, I feel like I like funerals because something very real is happening. I think a lot of our society has felt very false to me, and it feels like people get more real then.” While Yeshe spoke of her attraction to death from a young age, Arline described an absolute terror of death which she was eventually invited to confront over and over, through her work as a nurse for both AIDS and Hospice patients for many years.

Arline also confronted death through an experience in the wilderness when she took peyote, which is the same experience that was mentioned previously in an earlier discussion on the will to live. A number of insights arose for Arline during that experience, including the felt sense of merging with the earth through lying in an open grave with “thuds of cold dirt” on her back. Arline described the initial fear that turned to pleasure in this experience. She then went on to describe a process of disintegration:

I began to feel this body disintegrating. Decomposing. Composting. I began to feel the body become part of the earth and the earth become part of the body. It felt really, really nice. It was a disintegration process and a merging. I could actually even start to feel all the little sow bugs and the worms crawling through me. I mean, one of my roots of terror from a little girl was that song, [singing] *Did you ever think when a hearse went by that someday soon when you may die and I’ll wrap you up in a big white shirt and bury you six feet under the dirt and you’ll rot, rot, rot, and the worms crawl in and the worms crawl out and the worms go crawling all about, and you’ll rot, rot, rot six feet under the earth.* I had that song which we used to sing as children in my psyche I’m sure. I could feel the worms crawling in and out and it tickled. And the little bugs, I could see every line on the sow bugs’ backs. I mean, I was there. It was very nice. I just decomposed and became compost. It was all very graceful and comfortable and fine and okay.

Arline's description of disintegration, and the lyrics to the song she associates with that experience, strikingly resemble a passage from a woman in Anderson and Hopkins (1991) book who describes the breakdown of division between matter and spirit, as it is experienced through the earth. The participant, Rickie Livingston, recalled a process that revealed her fear of the earth. Studying with a shaman teacher, she was instructed to breathe, repeat the words, "Five below, below," and bring her energy to the center of the earth. Rickie Livingston recalls:

Suddenly I was suffocating. I was buried alive. I was choking in blood and soil. The chaos and panic of blind human suffering pressed into me. My flesh was rotting. I was worm-eaten. The blood and agony of earth was in my ears. The smell of fear and death, of destruction and decomposition overwhelmed me. Then I was a skeleton, then dust of bone, then only soil and a long silence. (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, pp. 90-91)

The ways in which Arline and Rickie Livingston's stories resemble one another suggest the possibility that a confrontation with death—and the various streams or *archetypes* through which this is experienced—may have inherent in them a universal component.

There is a Buddhist phrase which suggests that students should live with *death on their shoulder* as a way of remembering viscerally the impermanence of life. Rose works with this impermanence through releasing self images as a way of preparing for death:

At some point when I'm finished with what I came onto this Earth to do, I will leave this body. I will transition into another level of consciousness. That's why we practice in releasing images and releasing self images. It's to not identify in the way we normally identify with our bodies. I can be in my body, I can enjoy my body, I can love my body, and I can leave my body and not cling to it when the time comes. And I would like to do that as consciously as possible.

Reflecting on her eventual departure from this world of form, Catherine understands death as a "movement." She explains:

When I look at the mirror, I know my cells have changed drastically from years ago. I look in the mirror sometimes and say, Who's that old lady? It's you dear, it's you. You're an old woman now. Isn't that great? You're an old woman. And you know, life means something else when you're an older person. It's more

precious maybe. There's a joy that wasn't there. Your body is precious. This body that's slowly disintegrating around you is still very precious. So I don't know what death is, to tell you the truth. But I think it's just that movement.

Rose spoke about this movement of death and how some traditions practice facing this truth while still alive. Rose said, "The Sufi motto, if you will, is *Die before death, and resurrect now*. That death is the letting go of an image of oneself that we take to be ourselves." Over and over, participants reflected on the power of the contemplation of death.

It seems that sometimes the presence and opening that accompanies intense prayer and meditation is available through being with someone during the dying process. Yeshe said about the death of her mom, "Being with her the last few days before she died was like being with a high teacher, it was like a total Darshan. It was this incredible feeling of blessing and love, that just stayed in the house for months afterward because she died here." While I previously had a sense of the transformation that is available during the dying process, for both the person dying and for those around them, I am no longer convinced that an inherent companion to death need be fear.

Women are Teachers of Conscious Embodiment

My understanding of this seed lens since it was first intuited in Cycles 1 and 2 of this research had certainly become complex and more refined through this intuitive research process. Initially, I cringed a bit when I viewed the Cycle 2 lens (20) *Women are more embodied than men*. As time went on, I found that I had the urge to go back and fiddle with the wording of this lens. Can I really say that? What will people think? But of course, I did not revise this initial lens. I left it in its raw form to capture an important stage in the unfolding of my understanding of this lens.

What is especially interesting to note about this particular seed lens is that I did not have much understanding into *why* I felt this to be true. It just seemed to be the case. Then over the course of my conversations with the women in this study—and spiraling in and out of the texts that arose from those dialogues—I began to understand more fully *why* I sensed this to be true. And, my understanding refined and became more nuanced. I am still open to this lens continuing to change and evolve. What has especially deepened in this understanding is that women—perhaps in part due to the capacity for childbearing—do seem to have a biological attachment to “form” that is different from that of men. Therefore, by working with this attachment, and learning from the wisdom it has to teach us, they are natural teachers of this process of conscious embodiment.

Claire explained how women, or even the female at large, has a particular attachment to life. She said,

For this last book, my animal totem was the elephant, which is mobilizing the matriarchs, because it's the matriarch in the elephant herd that leads the herd to safety. It's the grandmothers and the mothers. That energy, if we don't do it, it's not going to happen. Because the men don't have that same cellular attachment to life.

Patricia suggested one possible reason for women's connection or cellular attachment to the body. She explained, “One can say that women have more of an issue being embodied because their bodies are more vulnerable. For women who have been abused or raped or something, getting into their bodies is more of an obvious kind of healing that needs to happen.” Patricia also said that women are natural teachers in this field of embodiment: “I don't think conscious embodiment is more so for women. I think that women are just a little bit ahead of the game, so that the women can actually be teachers in this.” Suggesting that perhaps part of women's connection to the body expands to include a connection with the earth, Patricia said, “I think that women sometimes are the

ones who tap in and know what needs to be done. Certainly the connection to the earth through the body is part of a woman's experience that lends to that, but I also think that spiritually women are often in the role of the transformers. That is the female wisdom energy.”

Yeshe spoke to the importance of childbearing as a factor in a woman's connection to the body. She said, “I think there is a way that women are generally connected in, unless you have a very male personality in a female body. I think there's a way that women are tuned in. Certainly for me, the whole experience of childbirth, and the whole experience of being pregnant was such an incredibly amazing experience.”

Rose explained how “feminine consciousness” is part of the relationship between spirit and flesh. Rose explained:

We talk about the body as a temple, and I started talking about it as what we are working to become. The word become flesh kind of thing. I think that really speaks to an influx of a feminine consciousness in the work and in the healing work. I really believe Hazrat Inayat Khan is talking about embodied spirituality that comes and lives in this world.

Theresa, too, reflected on women and the feminine in relationship to the body: “It's so easy to get stereotypical, but I wonder if women, at least the women I know, including myself, seem to treasure bodyliness as a conveyor of truth. Beauty, you know, in the deepest spiritual sense.” Claire described her process of coming into contact with the feminine. She said, “Even St. Paul said, ‘In Christ there is no male or female.’ That was what it was like during these difficult years, getting in touch with the feminine divine and loving her fiercely, and identifying. What if I didn't see God as just male? What if I saw God as female? Knowing that there's no gender, but all of a sudden, my whole body relaxed.” It seems that for many participants this sense of women being connected to the body is an intuitive knowing, one that may have to do with a woman's connection to

childbirth, her cellular attachment to life, her physical vulnerability. Though on some level it is not about any of these reasons, it's just a knowing, perhaps a body knowing.

Cara's comments on the relationship between women and awakening in the body seem to capture well, this overall *sense* of a woman's particular connection to enlightenment of the body. Cara suggested,

I feel that part of the reason I'm asking and you're asking that question, is because you're a woman. I've never heard a man exactly talk about matter like we are right now—the love, the thrill, and the desire to understand the inner nature and true nature of the body. For most male teachers, or even students for that matter, that's not where they go. But women, I feel that it's a very feminine thing to want the enlightenment of the body itself.

It would be interesting and useful to investigate through further research this claim that women have a stronger desire than men to understand the true nature of the body.

Obviously, this claim arising out of this research could be seen as inherently limited in that the participants in the study were all women. Further research might explore what men have to say about these claims. To what degree are the claims true that women are innately more thrilled by matter and attached to cellular life? Would most men agree with this understanding? If so, how much of this is biologically driven, or socially conditioned? In what ways is a woman's connection to matter both her gift and her burden on the spiritual path? Exploring these and other related questions are some of the ways I see this research continuing.

*Inquiring into the Relationship Between Body and Spirit Deepens and Enlivens
One's Experience of Living as a Body*

It is interesting to note that during Cycle 2 of this research I was inclined to name this seed as the first lens on my list: *(1) Inquiring into the tension between spirit and body enlivens one's felt sense of living as a body*. Now, as I near the end of Cycle 3, this seems appropriate to be the final consideration.

This lens is anomalous in certain ways because it is focused primarily on the process of inquiry, rather than on the content of what was being explored. Therefore, it is a process that I primarily witnessed and explored within myself throughout this research. In other words, this was not necessarily a part of what I talked about with the participants in this research. I would infer from much of what was said in the interviews, and through my experience of being in the interviews, that this was an implicit understanding for most, if not all of the women in the study. I have found this inquiry to be profoundly transforming, one of the deepest transformational process that I have undertaken and encountered thus far in my life. This is for all the many reasons I have stated throughout these pages. And the inquiry is certainly not over!

If I were to crystallize my understanding about the process of this journey through spirit and flesh that I have just traveled during this research, my primary discovery is this: *Inquiry changes us*. The very process of inquiry into the nature of something has the capacity to shift, broaden, and even dismantle our assumptions about things, to then ultimately open into a deeper and more refined understanding. Inquiry is an endless unfolding of discovery upon discovery. Inquiry, and in this case, intuitive inquiry specifically as a research method, has changed me.

Comments and Reflections on Intuitive Inquiry

After exploring this topic of spirit and flesh for over 3 years, with my vehicle for exploration being intuitive inquiry, I will now reflect further on the research method itself. Several aspects of intuitive inquiry stand out for me at this final stage of the study. First, intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology which has the potential to transform the researcher, the reader, and the text. Second, it is a method which models a dialectic, which in turn, invites the researcher into this significant developmental achievement. That is, the researcher is asked to participate in a dialectical process which by its nature calls forth the ability to simultaneously hold within oneself two opposing forces. Third, I will reflect on the method's inevitable subjectivity, which is both a limitation and a gift. Lastly, I will suggest that while the researcher, the reader, and the text are transforming through intuitive inquiry, so too, is the method. I will now turn to a more detailed discussion of these points.

Intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology which has the potential to transform the researcher, the reader, and the text. In intuitive inquiry the researcher is in constant dialogue, mutual conversation with the text. This creates an intersubjective space between the researcher and that which is being studied, the text. Therefore, as I have outlined throughout this dissertation, there is the possibility for transformation of the researcher throughout this process in all the variety of ways I have discussed previously. What I have not elaborated on thus far is the change that may occur for the reader who is engaging the study, and the change that is likely to occur in the text itself.

At times the hermeneutical circle of interpretation can be dizzying in that it constitutes an endless process of change for all subjects and objects involved in the encounter. While the researcher is being changed by the text she encounters, so to, is the

reader of this dissertation quite possibly being changed by the reading of *this* text. In an elaboration on mystical hermeneutics, Jeffrey Kripal (2001) outlines how an “invisible hermeneutical community” (p. 9) is made up of the mystic, the mystical experiences of the scholar studying the mystic, and the readers of the scholar’s work. In this intuitive inquiry, our hermeneutical community consists of our mystics, the contemporary women in this study; my hermeneutical-mystical experiences as researcher; and your hermeneutical responses to this text as reader.

Intuitive inquiry is participatory in that in addition to the possibility for the researcher and reader to be changed through this study, the text itself is also changing. One of the gifts of the postmodern movement is the notion that there is no single, objective text. The text only exists in relationship with the subject who is encountering the text. The Goethean scholar, Henri Bortoft (1996) explains this phenomenon: “We see that the phenomenon itself comes into a higher stage of manifestation in the very act of knowing, without it becoming, thereby, something which is only subjective” (p. 273). It is only from onlooker consciousness—the objective observer who is outside of the intersubjective space—that one could argue that the text does not change along with us. Reflecting on Goethe’s methodology of conscious participation in nature, Bortoft (1996) states, “Subject and object are born together, so that a change in the mode of one necessarily entails a change in the mode of the other” (p. 111). Intuitive inquiry is a participatory methodology in part because we bring ourselves as change instruments to the research process. Reflecting on Goethe’s science and the use of self as instrument, Bortoft (1996) explains that, “Thus, in Goethean science the scientist himself or herself has to become the instrument, and he or she has to participate actively in his or her own development in order to become this instrument” (p. 245). The research of intuitive

inquiry has the potential to change us as we are being used as instruments through which to study a phenomenon, and also we are the very instrument that transforms—as our lenses do—through the interpretive process. The process of interpretation changes us, which in turn gives us different lenses, by which we can then see differently. In this way, intuitive inquiry has the potential to be a powerful spiritual practice.

If we consider the text in this hermeneutic intuitive inquiry to be sacred—the wisdom springing forth from the hearts of contemporary female mystics—the study of this text can be understood as a spiritual encounter or practice. This process could be likened to mystical hermeneutics whereby the scholar, the divine, and mystical text are co-arising. In his discussion on mystical hermeneutics, Kripal (2001) describes the scholarly study of sacred text as “a triadic process of self, divine other, and text, none of which appear to exist in any independent objective fashion” (p. 7). It is useful to consider the ways in which intuitive inquiry as it is used in this study could be understood as both a triadic process between researcher, the divine other, and mystical text, as well as a dialectic one. If we understand a dialectic process in the Hegelian sense to be one of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, we might view Kripal’s triadic notion of self, divine other, and text as each being a part of what constitutes a true dialectic. In other words, self is the thesis in which our claims are stated; the text is the antithesis by which our claims are challenged; and the divine other is where we unite with the text to create a synthesis which then becomes our new thesis, through which to engage the text anew. Therefore, like mystical hermeneutics, intuitive inquiry is both a triadic process of self, divine other, and sacred text, and a dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Intuitive inquiry is a method which models a dialectic, which in turn, invites the researcher into the process of “holding” or entering into that dialectic. Psychotherapists

might recognize here the transformational possibilities inherent in a process which invites the researcher to hold a dialectic, which by its nature requires one to resist the ever-so-common human tendency to “split” (between good and bad, love and hate, subject and object, spirit and flesh). Drawing on Hegel and Kojève, the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden (1990) defines a dialectic:

A dialectic is a process in which each of two opposing concepts creates, informs, preserves, and negates the other, each standing in a dynamic (ever-changing) relationship with the other (Hegel, 1807; Kojève, 1934-1935). The dialectical process moves toward integration, but integration is never complete. Each integration creates a new dialectical opposition and a new dynamic tension. (p. 208)

If we assume, then, that part of the intuitive inquiry process for the researcher might include practice in holding a dialectic, what this also suggests is that by doing this, the researcher is strengthening her capacity for what Object Relationalists call a *whole object relationship* (Ogden, 1990; Winnicott, 1958/1992). For the purpose of this discussion, the aspect of a whole object relationship that is being considered here, is the capacity to tolerate opposing forces within oneself. A number of developmentalists point to this stage of being and knowing through a variety of names including Robert Kegan’s (1994) *fourth order of consciousness*, Ken Wilber’s (1995) *vision logic* stage, and Jean Gebser’s (1985) *integral-aperspectival* stage of development. As these theorists suggest, it is no small developmental task to tolerate opposing forces within oneself. A far more primitive response to life—and what is commonly understood as *splitting* in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Ogden, 1990)—is one where we collapse into spirit or body, good or bad, love or hate, subject or object. Through engaging the intuitive inquiry research process, we are invited into the profound human possibility of not collapsing into subject or object, but instead living in the dynamic space that is the dance between the two.

Intuitive inquiry's inevitable subjectivity is both a limitation and a gift. Because I as the researcher can only see through that which is my life experience, which creates the initial lenses through which I view the data, I am limited in that I cannot see that which lies outside the parameters of my perception. Quite possibly, another person with a different set of lenses will come into contact with the data gathered and find entirely new interpretations. However, while I am posing this as a possible limitation in the method, I also believe that virtually all modes of knowing are subjective. It is actually by acknowledging our embeddedness in the knower-known complex that more objectivity becomes available. The unique subjectivity the researcher brings to intuitive inquiry is both the gift and possibly the curse of the method. For it is what brings richness and dimension to each study. Though, if gone unchecked, that beautiful richness could be at risk of collapsing into narcissism.

I propose that while the researcher is transforming, along with the reader and the text, so too, is the method itself. The very nature of intuitive inquiry includes an organic impulse toward change. This means that the method will always be transforming through the relationship with each researcher. It is not a static structure but a fluid one. Embedded in the method of intuitive inquiry is this dialectical dance, a reciprocal, spiraling process that changes the researcher and the method. Therefore, while there are objective aspects that we may point to in this method, in many ways intuitive inquiry as a research method will never be the same twice, for it is shaped each time by the researcher who is engaging the text anew, which in this case is also the method itself, intuitive inquiry.

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Appendix A: Divinely Human—A Personal Story

My feet crunch against the crackling leaves that surround my dusty dirt driveway in the dead of summer. I step into this solid ground beneath me, and the fleshy ball of my right foot feels thick, dense, and prickly. The ground presses back, supportive and steadfast. As I lift my foot the sensations change: a neutral and spacious fluidity now permeates even my toes. A passing breeze dusts my ankle, as tingles buzz up my Achilles' tendon the way bubbles fizz through soda water. When my awareness attends to this interior layer of flesh and bone in my foot and up through my calf, I inhabit my body. Whereas I previously dragged my leg around as an almost foreign object—like a bag absently thrown over my shoulder—I now feel it as a dynamic and personal expression of embodied awareness. Consciously inhabiting my body is a daily practice, one forgotten and then remembered, forgotten and remembered again.

Such remembering used to be rare. My spiritual path over the last decade has been plagued with several disorienting periods of disembodiment. Now though, I genuinely and deliberately include my body in this process of self-realization. I am awakening in every cell.

The Dissolution of Me

A shift in consciousness a few years back shattered the reality I had come to know and rely on, a reality I comfortably called my self. The season was late summer, and I was ripe and ready to be squeezed by Spirit. After an extended period of intense reading, meditation, and solitary contemplative time, guided by various spiritual teachers, my consciousness began to expand beyond the boundaries of my body.

“Who am I?” I ask, following the prescriptions of the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, “and what is the source of all this experience?” A mind-shattering realization

arises. I can no longer identify an 'I' within my own body. 'I' am not limited to the local, physical body at all. I have committed a basic error in taking myself to be a personal and finite being, housed in this particular vessel called Vipassana. Unable to locate a fixed point where 'I' exist, I see that I am not limited to this woman's body in the mirror. Nor am I limited to the passing thoughts of my mind or the emotions that surge through this body. Instead, I recognize myself as the substance at the core of all creation. Out of that substance arises my body, as well as the entire phenomenal world. That substance is pure limitless awareness, expanding outward and inward ad infinitum. This is like waking up from a long dream or focusing a lens such that a crisp picture leaps into view. I feel as though reality is being turned completely inside out. Although the conventions of language require me to speak as an 'I,' it no longer seems accurate to say that 'I' feel, think, or sense anything, because these perceptions are not referring to a personal "me." I can no longer take credit for anything, since the whole notion of an individual 'I' is a fundamental error. Life is just mysteriously happening.

Although glimpses of non-separation or Oneness have previously washed over me along the spiritual path, this is altogether a fresh insight and unlike any of the past. Yet there is also a perplexing aspect, a sometimes frightening disorientation, particularly in relation to my physical body. From this vantage point, consciousness and my personal body appear to have very little to do with one another.

I've lost interest in sex. As my future-husband makes love to this container, I am simply the observer, unengaged, untouched, and disconnected from this vehicle, my body. Much of the time I witness my body from about one foot behind my head, as if watching myself on film. Sensations appear fuzzy and far away. It is as if a dream is being recalled, and only the flavor of the experience is accessible to the dreamer. Sex

feels distant and foreign, as though I am being stroked through layers and layers of woolen cloth. I only have the vague impression of being touched, as if I am straining to hear a faint call across miles of barren land. Dreamlike and hazy, I can see his hand on my belly and taste his saliva in my mouth, but I am removed from the body he so tenderly caresses. My body is numb to the material world. A wispy surrealness hovers about me. Sex feels neutral. There is no particular sense of either pleasure or aversion. Instead I feel untouched, while stillness permeates the bedroom. Out of that stillness arises a recognition that the same essential substance that animates him, also animates me—we are only One. Reality as I have known it before is now permeable and forever shifting. The “me” that previously has animated this body momentarily vanishes.

The sense of being outside and behind my body is particularly strong while driving. I peer at my arms and hands on the steering wheel from a point behind my head. I do not own my limbs, although cognitively I know they command control of the car on my behalf. Thoughts float by: Who is operating this car? If I am not located in this body, then where am I? Where is consciousness now? Panic arises as I attempt to locate a fixed point of reference—recognizable and distinct—a tidy box into which I can stuff awareness. I can’t find that box. As I stroll along the ocean in Santa Cruz, I am the salt and the sea and the air in front of me. I am a marionette moved by unseen strings. I feel myself to be everywhere. A thick substance of luminous light animates both my body and the physical space surrounding me. I identify with all of this substance as my own self. My mind feels the frustration of wanting “me” all back in one place. When the mind relaxes, however, I rest in the stillness of just being, everywhere and nowhere.

Terror arises when my mind fights the experience. As I sort denim and whites, measure liquid-blue detergent, and change my twenty for quarters at a Laundromat in

Santa Cruz, an unreal haze clouds my visual field. Once again I cannot locate myself in any fixed place. I see my arms fumble with the laundry, but I feel empty, vacated—void. The emptiness is a blank feeling. Death hovers in this destitute vacuum and I fear not existing. I yearn to grasp something, anything—a concept, my physical form, an identity—but I find myself dissolving into the space around me. I can't locate myself, but perhaps merely out of habit, I keep trying to find “me.” My mind grapples with this unusual perception, firing questions relentlessly: How are you doing the laundry if no one is there? Where are you if you aren't here? Who's operating your body if you're everywhere? Where is consciousness? Like a Zen koan, this inquiry exhausts and circumvents the mind at times, revealing the pure awareness behind the mind. When my mind fights to regain control, however, these questions create a panic, as they do today. Disoriented and blank, I anxiously gather my clothing bundles, stuff them into the car and retreat to my mountain abode where I can safely be nobody, and no body.

Later, on the final day of a silent Zen retreat in Santa Fe, a participant pulls me aside and suggests I read *Collision with the Infinite*, a book written by a forty-something Californian named Suzanne Segal (1996). When I arrive home, all in one sitting I read the familiar yet eerie words that detail Segal's experience. She describes losing a personal, localized sense of self and the disorientation that accompanies her loss of an individual ‘I.’ A major feature of her early experiences is terror, as she finds her body dissolving into the air around her. To no avail she attempts to will herself back into a finite and recognizable location, her body. In retrospect, I am amazed that a person I shared only a few words on retreat with, intuited my process so distinctly as to suggest this book. Segal's descriptions of disembodiment are immensely reassuring, if only to know that another person has had such experiences, and that she too has found them

deeply frightening. She puts words to some of the disorientation that washes through my field daily.

Reading Suzanne Segal's book helps normalize my experience. However, I still sometimes wonder if what I am encountering is pathological: Am I on the verge of insanity? Though intuitively I sense this is not the case. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition* (1994) describes the dissociative Depersonalization Disorder as one that is characterized by the distinct sensation of being detached from one's self or body. Although a person suffering from this disorder is in touch with reality, they may feel as though they are in a dream or movie and are watching themselves from outside their body.

Throughout this extraordinary period of separation from my body, I am thankful that I am not given the message—by teachers, colleagues, friends, and family from whom I seek guidance—that what I am encountering is pathological. Instead, I am offered validation for the unusual perceptual shifts that often accompany expanded states. This allows my experience to continue to unfold. Not all of this period is wrought with anxiety and frustration, however. Between the momentary panics and disorientation are hours and days of boundless joy and sheer stillness. Never before have I known such tranquil bliss and connection to Truth.

The Journey Home to My Body

After this sedentary summer of forgoing my Aikido training, I attend an Aikido class taught by an earthy, embodied feminine mentor. My body is no longer accustomed to moving quickly. Two and a half hours of rolling, falling, turning, spiraling, centering, entering, attacking, and blending sends me whirling. In my visual field the dojo contracts and expands like an accordion. Dizzy, I roll and jangle my innards. The dojo pulsates

with ki, life energy, flowing out of the Sensei's hands, into my fingertips, through my partner's legs, out his hands, and back into my heart. Time apparently passes, and I make my way out to my car after class. And then the shaking begins. Up from the concrete beneath me, a vibration moves into my feet and up through my lower legs, leading to violent shaking, rhythmic and uncontrollable. Rocking and undulating, my body heats up at the core while my limbs become damp and icy. The movement reaches my lower back and shoots up through my spine and out the top of my head. I feel as though I am receiving a physical substance, a mixture of heat and light. Guttural sounds release from my throat, as my jaw opens and head falls back. My right hand flits and shakes repeatedly, magnetically drawn to a point at the center of my forehead. These movements are involuntary, as if an energy, or electric current has literally entered the soles of my feet, animating each portion of my body as it works its way to my head. It feels as though a vibrating fire torch has blasted the central core of my body. I finally feel myself as a body again with a dynamic life force flowing through my veins. I quiver from the flow of this current all the way home, and for weeks thereafter.

As time passes, I understand this to be a fairly classic kundalini awakening (Sannella, 1992)—a sort of crash-landing for me, unifying matter and spirit, my human body and pure awareness. The paradox of having a body, yet not being limited to a body, has for many years been the crux of much of my spiritual inquiry. This inquiry gives rise to the question, How do I simultaneously live fully in my body, yet at the same time practice non-attachment to it? At death I will relinquish this vessel, yet still, it seems that I am given a body in part to learn to live in it fully. Today, my spiritual practice explicitly includes embodiment. I seek the place where matter and spirit mingle and merge, the

point where pure awareness expresses itself through a perfectly unique individual. Such is the gift of the human experience.

Integrating Body and Spirit

I savor that gift as I stop my car on the way up to San Rafael: the misty Tuesday morning beckoning me to pause and breathe in the salty sea air. Flecks of fog moisten my cheeks as I admire the partially-shrouded Golden Gate Bridge. I'm en route to my weekly session with a teacher of the Diamond Approach to self-realization, a systematic and gradual path of awakening developed by A.H. Almaas (1987). A joyful trepidation quivers in me as I prepare for yet another exploration into a facet of Being. Today, I allow myself respite from the hypersonic speed and stringent structure of my modern urban lifestyle. Tuesdays are my day for body knowing and body listening.

I enter his office and take a seat. My toes squish against the bright, aqua-blue rug beneath me, and my bottom sinks, solid and weighty, into the futon. I notice that my body feels slightly contracted. As the session unfolds, I become aware of the subtle hardening around my chest cavity, as if my heart is bound with masking tape. Our session inquires into that heart constriction and a jelly-like quality in my chest reveals itself, as if my heart is softly being kneaded. It is painful to feel such constriction burning up, and then melting away. When did my heart first become bound? We look at a drawing of imaginative flowers, swirls, and spirals that I drew when I was six years old. I can feel myself embody the wonder, freedom, and whimsical mood of a six year old—like that of a lilac growing wild. My heart is relaxing. The tears that follow are like the first rainfall moistening a parched riverbed. I breathe deeply into my belly as the area around my heart softens still more. Tender love sweeps through my body, engulfing me with compassion and acceptance. I recognize myself as that love.

Our session complete, I begin the leisurely southward journey home, stopping along the way to run, sit, consciously breathe, and write. Running along the bay in Tiburon, my bones feel sturdy and muscles sinewy. A quiet vapor-like mist moves through my bloodstream, out to my toes and through each fingertip. I am inspired by the pampas grass that bends in the wind, regally erect yet accommodating to the breeze. A sharp side pain reminds me to breathe all the way to the depths of my hara, the energetic center below the belly. Bringing awareness to the discomfort—breathing into it—the pain soon dissolves. With a greater ease of breath, spacious vulnerability rises from my torso. Feet and legs connect to the earth as they pound the forgiving clay path: bone and muscle being lived in. Legs pick up speed, almost with a will of their own. Pumping, my body sprints faster, and then still faster. Blood, flesh, and bone pulsate with life. Joy flashes through my body as a bolt of fierce sweetness. And then stillness descends again, quiet and neutral.

I continue my trek home. Sitting on a shiny bench at the Marina Green, I inhale the panorama before me: Golden Gate, Sausalito, Alcatraz, big sky, and water of the San Francisco Bay. It is late October and the sun blazes in a cloudless sky. The sound of splashing water meeting the rocks and sea wall, before returning back to its great source invites me to return to my source. My breath falls into rhythm with the waves: lapping, breathing, lapping, breathing. My eyelids grow heavy as the sea kisses me into trance; I am being breathed. My nostrils expand, the tiny hairs inside tickled with the salty air. My throat and chest, diaphragm and stomach relax—moving with the song of the tides. The sensation of floating envelops my body, as the subtle obstacles blocking my breath dissolve in laughter.

The journey continues: inward, downward, and outward. I am enjoying my personal location. After hours of writing at my favorite Italian cafe, I step out onto the bustling San Franciscan street and am greeted by flickering Fall light and the hum of humans. The light flirts with me shimmering in its heat. Buoyancy flows in my body and is reflected in my step. I feel the earth below me, sturdy and dense. Burgundy, viridian, and mustard-colored leaves paint the sidewalk. I am reminded of how Gurdjieff spoke of the food of impressions. The colors, smells, breeze, sound, and taste of dry autumn feed my soul. I am nourished by this delicious sensory food. The mind falls silent as my breathing slows and deepens. I shiver as the wind tingles my ears and sweeps my hair back, while my head expands into eternal space. The ground beneath me provides thick roots that climb up through my legs, gnarly and solid.

It is still Tuesday and I am home again, journeying with the Beloved: my husband and I move together—as if we are recalling an ancient, perfectly choreographed dance to the eternal beat of creation. As we make love in the glowing afternoon rays, electricity whispers up my spine, vertebrae by vertebrae, and zaps into him. With the roar of this fire-current, my mind stills like an untouched pool of water. Liquid life pours into my body and I am vibrant and alive. A fire ball of heat pulses in my chest and moves downward through my thighs, burning away the most subtle blocks of contraction. I allow him into my very center, for a split second hiding nothing. For a moment we are only one ecstatic body. I open myself not only to my lover, but to my own deepest core of bone and flesh, and to God—pure awareness expressing itself through each pore of my swelling body. I am in awe.

Appendix B: Chöd Text

You might ask, "What is known as chöd, what does it cut through?"
 Since it cuts through attachment to the body, it is chöd.
 Since it cuts through the root of the mind, it is chöd.
 Grant your blessing that I be free of cherishing
 This illusory body, gathering of four elements.
 Separate the material [body] and awareness.
 Blend awareness and space.
 Remain within the depths of emptiness.
 The practice is to offer your aggregates as a feast.
 With the hook of compassion I catch those evil spirits.
 Offering them my warm flesh and warm blood as food,
 through the kindness and compassion of bodhichitta I transform the way they see
 and make them my disciples.

Leave your body like a corpse;
 Leave it without an owner.
 Leave your mind like space;
 Leave it without any reference point.

Like space that has no hope or fear,
 Don't conjure up these two, but rest at ease.
 Like space not fixed on ego,
 Don't grasp onto a self, let clinging go.

For example, within empty space,
 There is no thing that takes another for support.
 Like this, the nature of your mind
 Does not rely on an object: one thing is not supported by another.
 Rest without contrivance in the expanse of the natural state.

You gain mastery of emptiness, which is free of all extremes
 and is not established through having an inherent nature;
 [it is] like the depths of space.
 Great emptiness is [to be] free of a mind that arises, abides, and ceases.
 You understand and realize that the body is not truly existent,
 [but] a reflection of emptiness. (Edou, 1996)

Appendix C: William Everson Text

And in the melding of fire
 That great love gathers murmurous and strong.
 They have moved in this measure out of the demarkated world,
 They have touched the zone of assumed existence.
 In the reciprocal pulse of a pure union
 The light and dark polarities fuse,
 The reconciling symbol, incarnate, joining mystery to mystery,
 Annuls limitation. And in that union
 Wholeness, the core Godhead, dawns.

For God grows in them.
 In the sacramental oneness
 Presence flows and possesses; in the unsearchable
 Deeps of that contemplation
 Spirit abides; they know the wholeness of spirit.
 Its mystical knowledge moves into union,
 Makes a rapture within, and they worship.
 They gaze in worship on the deep God-presence each wakes in the
 other,
 And night contains them.

For over the bed
 Spirit hovers, and in their flesh
 Spirit exults, and at the tips of their fingers
 An angelic rejoicing, and where the phallos
 Dips in the woman, in the flow of the woman on the phallos-shaft,
 The dark God listens.

For the phallos is holy
 And holy is the womb; the holy phallos
 In the sacred womb. And they melt.
 And flowing they merge, the incarnational join
 Oned with the Christ. The oneness of each
 Ones them with God. (Everson, 1978, pp.140-141)

Appendix D: Janet Adler Text

Light is pouring out
of my body.
Light is pouring
in rays, creating
a form on the earth
a form of a woman. (Adler, 1995, p. 84)

I am naked
lying face down
in the earth
my dark hair
mingling
with the dark of the earth
my tongue licking
the earth in great sweeps.

Undulating, I burrow
into the soil.
A tree grows
through me
cracking my pubis
piercing the base
of my spine
and out.

The four seasons
travel
through the tree.
I keep moving
my shoulders, my head
writhing. (pp. 85-86)

Appendix E: Zuleikha Lyrics as Text

The song is called *Rabia Song*, written and recorded by Zuleikha (Undated); the lyrics of which are inspired from a poem by the Sufi mystic Rabia, who lived between 717-801 B.C.E. The lyrics read:

Where are you going?
 She said, "to that world."
 And where have you come from?
 She answered, "from that world."
 And what are you doing in this world?
 And she said, "I am sorrowing."
 In what way, they asked of her?

And Rabia replied,
 "I am eating the bread of this world,
 and doing the work of that world.
 Eating the bread of this world,
 and doing the work of that world."

Allah. Allah. Allah.
 Allah. Allah. Allah.

I have loved thee, with two loves.
 I have loved thee, with two loves.
 One that is selfish, the other that is glorious.
 One being selfish, one being glorious.

In what way, they ask of her,
 and Rabia replied,
 "Of the selfish love,
 I exclude all but you.
 Of the other,
 you enfold me in glory."

Allah. Allah. Allah.
 Allah. Allah. Allah.

Appendix F: Consent Form for Spiritual Exemplar Participants

To the Participant in This Research:

You are invited to participate in a study to explore the nature of the absolute-relative paradox of embodiment (spirit embodied), as it is experienced in spiritual exemplars.

The procedure will involve an approximately 1 and 1/2 hour interview. The interview will take place at your home or other mutually-agreed location. The interview will be tape-recorded for the purposes of this research only. You will be asked to review written summaries of your interview, and will be invited to make any corrections you desire.

For the protection of your privacy, all information received from you will be kept confidential as to source. The tapes from the interview session will be kept in a locked location and will be accessed only by the researcher. A pseudonym of your choosing will be used to identify you during the taping session and on all written documents. In reporting on this study in any publication, any information that might identify you will be altered to ensure your anonymity.

Potential benefits from this study include a deepened understanding of the temporal-eternal continuum as it arises in your own lived body-experience, and the possibility of furthering others' spiritual, psychological, kinesthetic, and cognitive understanding of this paradox.

This study is designed to minimize any potential risks to you. In the event that the material that arises through the interview process causes you distress, I can provide referrals to local support people, including licensed psychotherapists and psycho-spiritual counselors. If at any time you have any concerns or questions, I will make every effort to answer and resolve them.

Should you have any questions or concerns, you may call me. Or you may call Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Chairperson and Chairperson of the Ethics Committee for Research at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology at (650) 493-4430.

If you decide to participate in this study, you may still withdraw at any time during its conduct for any reason without penalty or prejudice. You may request a summary of the research findings by providing your mailing address with your signature.

By signing below, I certify that I have read the foregoing, and have had my questions and concerns about this research answered to my satisfaction. My participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I agree to participate in this research without any pressure having been applied. The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology assumes no responsibility for psychological or physical injury resulting from this research.

Participant's Signature

Date

Mailing Address (if you would like a summary of the research findings):

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix G: Sample Letter to Participants

January 15, 2003

Dear _____,

Blessings in this beautiful Winter season.

Enclosed you will find a summary of our interview. This "summary" consists of excerpts which have been edited by me for clarification and grammatical accuracy, taken directly from our talk. For this portion of the dissertation, I have decided to leave my voice out (with the exception of the brief demographic introduction that precedes the quotes). In a latter portion of the dissertation I will be working with and interpreting your words, though for this segment, I would like your voice to stand alone. In any editing that I have done, I have attempted to not alter the content, but have tried to simply help create a greater sense of flow for the reader (for example, by taking out extraneous words such as "and" or "but" or repeated words). Please keep in mind that due to the nature of spoken dialogue, the text is not always grammatically accurate. I tried to strike a balance between accurately representing your voice, and creating ease for the reader.

In contrast to what I said in an earlier correspondence, all that I will draw on from our dialogue is included in this summary. In other words, I will not print any other portion of our dialogue that is not first included here. With this in mind, please review this excerpted narrative (the summary) and let me know if you would like to see any changes, particularly in regard to:

- 1) The passages I chose to print and the editing of your words for clarification.
- 2) The pseudonym used for you, particularly if I chose the name.
- 3) The demographic introduction, keeping in mind that I have changed names and cities of residence to protect your anonymity.
- 4) Words I have added [in brackets] for clarification and flow.

In some cases, minor, technical editorial changes may still occur even after this point, as my committee, and various editors review the text. I assure you though, that if this happens the changes made will not alter the content of your message. If there is any question about this, I will contact you for clarification and permission before I make any significant changes.

Please take the next month to look over this material. If you need longer than that, just please let me know. *If I don't hear anything from you by the second week of February, I will assume that I may proceed with your permission.* If everything looks fine to you, there is no need to contact me. I will assume that no word means "continue on."

Thank you again for your participation in this inquiry into the relationship between spirit and flesh in contemporary female mystics. I am deeply grateful for your wisdom and generosity, and it is my hope that others may too, be benefited by this inquiry.

Please note my new email address at the bottom of the page.

With joy and blessings,

Vipassana Esbjörn
vipassanaesbjorn@yahoo.com